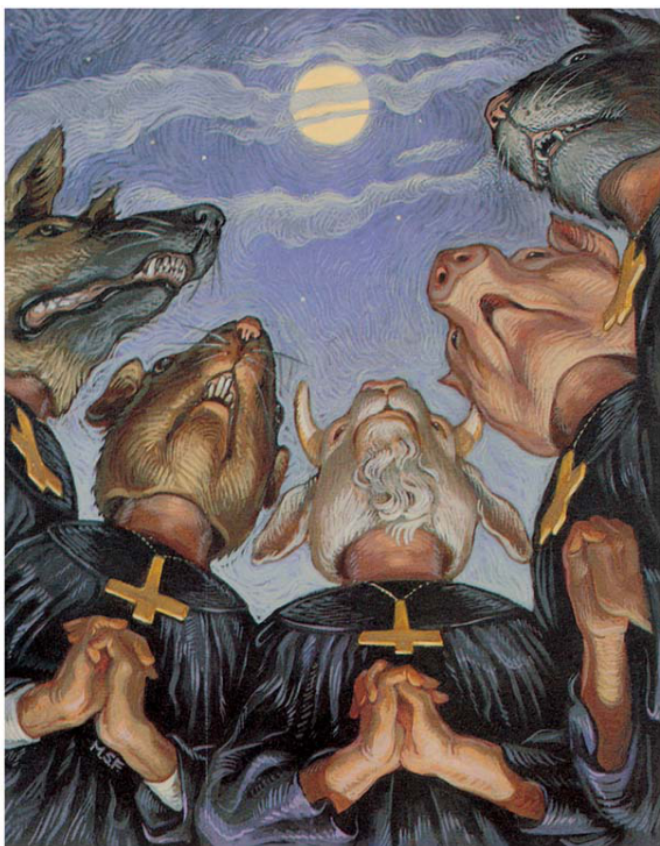


LEO BRUCE

Death on Allhallowe'en



A CAROLUS DEENE MYSTERY

DEATH ON ALLHALLOWE'EN

Carolus Deene, the amateur detective with his own style of solving riddles of violent death, has to bide his time in the small Kentish village of Clibburn, where he is early given to understand he is a 'foreigner'. However, despite a trick to have him elsewhere, he is present when a popular local figure is shot dead on the stroke of midnight, and before his work is completed he has the answers to two other deaths, one of which was not even suspected. While he is not sure how seriously to take the local witchcraft stories, he perceives how a past event can have provided a blackmailer with a rare opportunity—and from that moment his own life is in danger.

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DEATH ON ALLHALLOWE'EN

by
LEO BRUCE



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One

‘I tell you candidly—I’m frightened.’

Carolus Deene looked at the speaker incredulously. He had known him for almost thirty years, since they had shared certain experiences at Arnhem, and the recollection of these made him smile at John Stainer’s confession.

‘You?’

‘Yes. I. Me. Whichever it is.’

‘Scared by an old woman playing at witchcraft? I don’t believe it.’

‘It’s not just that. I was as sceptical as you are at first. You had better let me tell you the whole story and then see whether you want to laugh it off.’

‘Go ahead,’ said Carolus. ‘I’ll keep an open mind. Perhaps I had better tell you first that I do believe in the devil. Yes, Satan, the Prince of Darkness. I believe he is at work in the world of today, seeking whom he may devour. And I don’t think that calling him Old Nick or Old Harry and talking about his cloven hooves and generally being joky about him makes him any less credible. But I *don’t* believe he comes in person to the call of some old fortune-telling crone who does things with wax and hot needles.’

‘Nor do I. It was foolish of me to tell you that first.’

John Stainer was the rector of a country parish and although he did not wear a clerical collar or talk sermonese or behave as a painfully hearty good mixer, it was not difficult to guess his calling. Thick white hair and a young face gave him a frank and easy expression and one could see why he had always been a popular man.

He nodded to Carolus who was offering him a whisky and soda, and went on, ‘I should have started with the village and broken down your disbelief by telling you something about that. It’s called Clibburn ...’

‘Oh, is it?’ interrupted Carolus. ‘Then you have your hoof-mark right away. You need look no farther then the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. *Klioban*, Old High German for “cloven”. But I’m no etymologist and that may be nonsense.’

‘Do you know anything about the Isle of Guys?’

‘Only as a geographical fact. It’s in the Thames Estuary, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. Or thereabouts. Like the Isle of Sheppey and the Isle of Grain.

They're peninsulas really. Guys consists of about ten square miles of grazing country, one large village, two groups of cottages, one church, two pubs and a population of about a thousand people. It has not yet been discovered.'

'You mean exploited, surely?'

'I mean discovered. Guys is one of those tracts of country, of which there are more in Great Britain than you imagine, which almost nobody visits and in which absolutely nobody would choose to live. It is flat and dreary with rain and mists coming in from the estuary and mudflats instead of a beach. Obviously it has the usual amenities—television, radio, electricity, mains water—but only one road connects it with the Kentish mainland and that is sometimes flooded. The inhabitants—and this is perhaps the point—call themselves Guysmen, and are mostly the sons of Guysmen for a good many generations. The names on the gravestones show that.'

'A perfect setting for the goings-on you describe. Too perfect. I find it hard to believe in the Isle of Guys.'

'So did I, at first. In fact, when I was given the living nearly three years ago and went to live in the very comfortable modernised rectory. I thought the whole place was almost cosy. You don't see anything odd at first. Young people With It, swinging, whatever the term is at the moment. Older people bridge-playing, viewing television, having a drink at the pub, all like any other village. Perhaps rather more church-going than most.'

'Of course. People who believe in the devil must surely believe in God.'

John Stainer ignored this.

'All quite normal, in fact. Then you begin to notice things.'

'What sort of things?'

'I can't just reel them off. I can't even distinguish between what may be significant and what I imagine to be. But for one thing the extraordinary attention paid to the woman I told you about, Alice Murrain.'

'Tell me more about her, for a start.'

'She's about fifty. A Guyswoman, the daughter of a farmer who committed suicide thirty years ago.'

'How?'

'Hanged himself, I believe. Alice's mother died in giving birth to her. People still talk of the surprise that was felt when Alice went away after her father's death and returned with a husband, a complete stranger to Guys who has never succeeded in integrating himself in the life of the place. I find him very difficult to get on with, a lean, shifty sort of fellow who smiles a lot

but says very little. He seems to have a life of his own and goes up to London quite often without his wife. But he is a mere consort. Alice Murrain is a sort of queen.'

'Of spades?'

'Carolus, I don't like listening to gossip, and what I have heard comes chiefly from people who don't live in Clibburn. She is said to have the Evil Eye, with all the powers that go with it. She is also supposed to have Second Sight.'

'Quite an oculist.'

'I know it must all seem rather absurd to you. But you haven't lived in the place.'

'It doesn't sound absurd. I know what superstition can do to people. Haven't you anything more cogent?'

'Yes. I have. Xavier Matchlow.'

'A Catholic, presumably?'

'RC? Certainly not now, though he may have been christened one. He was for many years a disciple of Aleister Crowley.'

Carolus laughed aloud.

'That old bogymen!'

'I quite agree. In himself. But there is no doubt of the effect he had on others. He was a fraud and a charlatan but people believed in him. The lives he ruined are a matter of history.'

'And Matchlow's was one of them?'

'It is hard to say. He is a rich recluse.'

'Noctambule?' asked Carolus mischievously.

'Well, yes. He walks at night.'

'Moonlight?'

'All right, Carolus. You can send me up. But wait till I have told you everything.'

'Your friend Xavier is presumably a bachelor?'

'No. Mrs Matchlow is one of the few friends I've got in Clibburn. Very down-to-earth—a thoroughly nice woman. I once gently approached the subject of her husband's former friendship with Aleister Crowley and she dismissed it at once. "I've no patience with that sort of thing," she said.'

'You say her husband is a rich recluse. What do you mean by that?'

'He is a very rich man—owns a lot of land round Clibburn. He goes

shooting, his only sport. Otherwise he never goes anywhere, so far as I can tell. Judith his wife has a car but he's never seen in it. His only acquaintance seems to be a farmer named William Garries who lives about a mile out of the village.'

'What do you know about him?'

'Rather a nineteenth-century figure. Big fellow, sixtyish, hard-working and hard-drinking. Has one son, George, who seems a very ordinary, quite pleasant young man. The farm has been in the Garries family for centuries, I believe. Father and son come to church, but there are stories about them.'

'Stories?'

'The usual thing. Witchcraft. Black magic.'

'Do you believe them?'

'Not really. I certainly shouldn't have done so three years ago. It may well be that the place is getting on my nerves. But there was one small incident some months back which made me wonder. I was passing the church rather late one night and saw a light on. I was going to investigate when it was extinguished. As I reached the wych-gate I met William Garries leaving the churchyard. He was not drunk, but I fancied he had been drinking. He smiled and said good night quite cheerily and was going to pass when I stopped him and said, "Did you see a light in the church, Mr Garries?" "Light? No," he said, and walked on. I found the church locked, but everyone knows where the key is kept under a stone near the porch. Next morning, when I went over as usual at seven-thirty, I noticed something very disturbing and unpleasant. There is a crucifix hanging behind the pulpit, a recent gift to the church from a parishioner. It had been hung upside down.'

'I don't like that,' said Carolus. 'Nothing else was touched?'

'Nothing.'

'Who was the parishioner who gave you the crucifix?'

'A man named Connor Horseman. He came to live in the village a little before I did.'

'What significance do you attach to the inverted crucifix? Old-fashioned Anti-Christ?'

'Yes, but a rather special form of it, I should think, else why was nothing done to the crucifix on the high altar? Or anything else in the church? No, I think this was aimed at me. No one else occupies the pulpit—unless on very rare occasions some visiting preacher. I stand beneath that crucifix every Sunday and hold forth.'

‘Couldn’t it have something to do with the man who *gave* the crucifix, though?’

‘I suppose it could. The whole thing is so twisted. Sometimes I think these people are up to something really fiendish, devil-worship, the cult of Satan; sometimes I see nothing but antiquated and ignorant notions of witchcraft.’

‘Tell me about the donor of the crucifix.’

‘Certainly. He’s a writer. He is not popular with the older people, I believe, but then strangers seldom are. I’m not myself. But I rather like him. He is about our age. Lost a leg in the war.’

‘You’re giving me a very concise who’s who, John. Haven’t you a village idiot to produce?’

John Stainer smiled.

‘Not far from it. Charlie Sloman. He’s a young man of twenty or so whose mental age is about fourteen. Perfectly well behaved and a rather engaging character, but very irresponsible. A practical-joke mentality.’

‘All you lack is a Devil’s Punchbowl.’

John smiled.

‘We can manage that too. Or, at least, a disused well, reputed to be bottomless but probably only deep. It’s on the road out to Garries’. It’s known as the Bottomless Pit—that’s the sort of exaggerated term we go in for round Clibburn.’

‘Any other anomalies?’

‘Among my parishioners? Not more than usual. And no one I have any reason to connect with what you call goings-on. Connor Horseman’s wife Mavis is another nice sensible person. There are some friendly high-spirited youngsters. An amiable publican and a few sinners. But, as I’ve told you, you might think it a very ordinary village at first sight.’

‘Then I simply don’t understand what you mean by saying you’re frightened.’

‘I haven’t told you the most disturbing thing. You simply won’t be able to laugh at this, Carolus, because it involves the death of a little boy. You may think I’m a credulous ass to connect it in any way with the things I have suggested, though I can’t see how it can be otherwise. I’ll tell you the story.’

‘Let me fill your glass. Go ahead.’

‘As you can imagine, in a village like this a good deal happens on Allhallowe’en.’

Carolus smiled.

'I imagine you can scarcely hear yourself speak for the whoosh of broomsticks overhead.'

'I meant that it is celebrated by everyone,' said John Stainer reproachfully. 'Children's parties. Dance in the village hall.'

'So it is in thousands of other villages. It has become quite a thing lately.'

'Well, yes. But in Clibburn it's more than that.'

'You've let this get on your nerves, John. You can't take this phony tradition seriously? Allhallowe'en, as we know it, is an American thing. Steeple hats, broomsticks and that.'

'It was something more than that last year in Clibburn. On the day following, which as you know is All Saints' Day, one of my parishioners came to see me in a very excited state. His name is Albert Gunning. He was born in the village and owns the petrol station. It was a blacksmith's forge in his father's time, but Albert made it a garage just before the war. He still keeps the old forge and amuses himself with metalwork. He's a man in his fifties with a wife much younger than himself. Quite intelligent. The last man you'd have thought to be upset by the so-called supernatural. He did not seem able to tell me what he wanted at first, then he told me that his wife had told him to come for me. His wife is a Guyswoman. It was for their little boy. He was in a bad way. I told him I'd come at once, but there was something else he wanted to say. There was devil's work in it, he said. Young Cyril had been all right yesterday. Eventually I got out of him what he was trying to tell me. They wanted me to exorcise the boy. They believed he was possessed of the devil.'

Carolus took this quite seriously.

'And did you?' he asked.

'I went back with Albert. He has a neat little modern bungalow behind the petrol station. I remember thinking what a strange world we live in when from surroundings like this one can get a call for exorcism. I found Cicely Gunning, the wife, fairly calm but very anxious that I should do what she asked. "Cyril's asleep now because the doctor has given him something. But it's what I say, Mr Stainer. The devil's in him, and he won't live long unless you can do what we ask you. He's been saying terrible things all day."'

John Stainer had asked how it started.

' "He went out yesterday evening," she said. "He was as right as rain then. Fooling about with the other boys. I thought they were up to some lark—it was Allhallowe'en—and didn't worry when he didn't come back

before dark. But when it came to nine o'clock I began to think something was wrong and sent Albert out to have a look for him. You read such things in the papers about children. But there was no sign of him anywhere about here, and when Albert asked at one or two houses it seemed that all the other children had come home hours ago.

‘ “Well, then we raised the alarm. We went to Rutters.” Rutters is our local policeman. He comes from the mainland and is not much liked in Clibburn. “Lot of good he was. Some of the men started out in different directions. One thing was, nobody had seen any strangers about or cars in the village that didn't belong here. But I was worried out of my mind.

‘ “Towards morning Albert came back with nothing to report. All of a sudden something came to me and I told him to look out towards the Beacon.” ’

John Stainer paused. ‘The Beacon's a bit of a rise about two miles from Clibburn. I did not think to ask Cicely Gunning why she had chosen that, but I wish I had. She certainly did not say.’

‘Something came to her,’ said Carolus thoughtfully. ‘She told you so.’

‘Typical,’ said John. ‘They're all full of this nonsense. Guys people don't talk about their local traditions, and when I asked someone else about the Beacon all I heard was that it had a bad name. Cicely looked very strained when she talked about it, then said a rather dramatic thing. “He found him there, *of course*.” It appeared that Albert found young Cyril lying beside a footpath that led towards Clibburn. He was very cold and frightened, but did not say much at first except to whisper to his father, “I ran away, Dad.”

‘Albert got him home as quickly as he could and he was wrapped up in bed with hot-water bottles. In the morning he became delirious and said the terrible things that Cicely Gunning had mentioned. The doctor was sent for, diagnosed pneumonia, and gave him a sleeping pill. It was at this stage that I was called in.’

‘What did you do?’

‘To be truthful, I could only prevaricate. I know there is a form of exorcism which is occasionally used in extreme cases, but I had no idea where it could be found, and in any case I decided I couldn't do anything without the bishop's authority, and he was abroad attending a conference. It was a very difficult matter for me to decide. I told Albert and Cicely that I would try to get authority and would come back next day. I put it off as long as I could and then decided that I would act on my own responsibility. I blessed some water as I do for the stoup in the church and set out for the house. But it was too late. Cyril had died that morning.’

'Of pneumonia?'

'That was the officially given cause.'

'But you think it was something else?'

'I have only the boy's words spoken in delirium to go on. I think he had been present at some sort of Black Mass.'

'Really, John!'

'There was something else. Cicely Gunning said that when Albert brought him in he had blood on his face. No wound, but dried blood.'

'She washed it off, of course?'

'Oh, yes. She was horrified.'

'So it was never examined or analysed?'

'No. A mother doesn't leave bloodstains on her son to be analysed.'

'I suppose not.'

Two

‘Why didn’t you come to me at the time?’ Carolus asked. Then without waiting for an answer he said, ‘I suppose there was an investigation?’

‘I suppose so. Two plain-clothes men were in the village, but they had nothing to go on but Cicely’s story of bloodstains and some words uttered in delirium by an eight-year-old boy. Guys people become mute on such occasions. At all events Cyril was buried, and things went on much as before.’

‘Till next Allhallowe’en presumably?’

John Stainer looked serious.

‘That’s on Saturday week,’ he said.

‘I see what you mean by saying you’re frightened. You think there may be another incident?’

‘Listen, Carolus. I’m not a fool and I’m not superstitious. Obviously I don’t believe in black magic or witchcraft or anything of the sort. That’s to say I don’t believe in what they represent. But I do believe that there are people who practise these rites, and I think such people are dangerous. I want you to come and stay with me for a fortnight or so. You’re not teaching this term.’

‘No. The headmaster calls it a sabbatical. He didn’t suppose it would be a witches’ sabbath.’

‘But you’re free.’

‘Yes.’

‘Then come over. I’ve told you I have a comfortable rectory. The last incumbent was a rich man and installed central heating and made a lot of changes. You’d find the place interesting even if you don’t believe a word of what I’ve told you.’

‘I find most places interesting. Particularly isolated villages.’

‘And if you do think there’s any sort of danger I imagine you’ll like it all the better.’

‘Yes. Up to a point. I value my life.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean that sort of danger.’

‘I do, oddly enough.’

'You mean for you or me? No. Whatever is going on affects these people only. It's among themselves. I'm sure of that.'

'I dare say you're right. How will you account for me?'

'Old Service friend.'

'But you say they resent all strangers?'

'They don't show it. You would be treated in an outwardly friendly way.'

'Unless they thought I was snooping? Anyway, thank you, John. I'd like to come.'

'Good. Then I'll tell you something else. It may be my imagination, but I have thought, in these last weeks, that there is a new tension in the air. I get my congregation on Sunday just the same, but very few of my parishioners seem to come my way or talk to me privately. There's a good deal of whispering....'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Heads close together. Little solemn groups. I can't explain. There's an *atmosphere*, Carolus. Can't you understand that?'

'It's a good thing I've known you for a long time, John. If anyone else gave me all this I should send him to a psychiatrist.'

'You may be right. All the more reason why you should come. But let us suppose for a moment that there are people in my parish who practise diabolism. The fact that the thing itself is nonsense does not make those that have faith in it any less liable to do evil and dangerous things, as you yourself have said.'

'You think they may have been responsible for the little boy's death?'

'Cyril died of pneumonia. But how did he get it?'

'I see what you mean. I should like to know what these terrible things were that he said.'

'Shouted.'

'Or shouted in delirium.'

'You must wait till you see Cicely Gunning. She will remember most of them, and I don't want to confuse you with the bits that have stuck in my mind. They're not pleasant to hear in the circumstances. But whatever happened to him that night was not the work of a single person. He perpetually spoke of "them". I think they as good as murdered the child.'

'Oh, come! You don't as good as murder, surely. You either murder or you don't, and Cyril died of pneumonia.'

'Well, caused his death.'

‘That’s better.’

‘I wish I had exorcised him. You’re an RC, Carolus, and probably don’t believe in our Orders.’

‘On the contrary. But go on.’

‘According to the teaching of your own Church, exorcism like baptism can be undertaken by anyone in an emergency.’

‘You really believe the boy was “possessed”?’

‘I don’t know what to believe. But I’m very glad you’re coming to Clibburn.’

‘I am almost as interested in the story of the crucifix hung upside down,’ said Carolus thoughtfully.

‘Yes. It was an ugly sight.’

‘Did you ever mention it to the man who gave you the crucifix?’

‘Connor? Yes. But he was not much impressed, I’m afraid. He seemed to think it had no more importance than a childish anonymous letter. I couldn’t agree with that, as you may guess.’

‘Nor I. It seems to me that at this stage it is the only positive proof that something is seriously wrong. I certainly want to come.’

‘Good. And I hope you can make it soon.’

‘Tomorrow,’ promised Carolus.

‘Morning?’

‘No. I’ll come about four in the afternoon.’

‘Splendid. I shall expect you.’

When John Stainer had left Carolus called Mrs Stick, his efficient, devoted but somewhat tyrannical housekeeper, a small woman with steel-rimmed spectacles, skilled in perceiving the first signs of Carolus’s interest in crime and trying to circumvent them.

‘Oh, Mrs Stick,’ he said casually—too casually he felt—‘I’m thinking of going away for a couple of weeks.’

Her face did not change as she peered at him.

‘Indeed, sir? Away?’

‘Yes, away, Mrs Stick. I’m going to stay with my old friend John Stainer at his country rectory.’

Mrs Stick had great respect for the cloth.

‘That will be very nice for you. Where might it be?’

‘A place called Clibburn, in Kent.’

Carolus could almost see Mrs Stick running through the files of her daily paper searching for any accounts of crime connected with Clibburn.

‘Won’t it be a trifle dull for you, sir?’ she asked suspiciously. ‘There won’t be much happening in a small village.’

‘That’s exactly what I hope,’ lied Carolus. ‘I want a rest.’

‘Well. I’ll pack your things,’ conceded Mrs Stick. ‘It’s to be hoped you’re speaking the truth, sir.’

‘I thought perhaps you and Stick might like to have a week or two’s holiday while I’m away.’

‘It’s not the time of year for holidays,’ pointed out Mrs Stick unresponsively.

‘Still, a little change ...’

‘I’ll see what Stick says.’

When she returned a few minutes later it was with a brighter face.

‘Stick says he *would* like a breath of sea air,’ she told Carolus. ‘Even though the summer’s over, as you might say. He fancies Margate.’

‘I should have thought that might be rather dreary in autumn.’

‘It’s the shrimping, sir. Stick does love a bit of shrimping.’

So it was settled. The house would be closed.

As Carolus drove next day along the one road that led across the Isle of Guys to Clibburn he was reminded of Swinburne’s lines—‘Mile on mile on mile of desolation, League on league on league without an end’. The grim and darkening landscape would have been dispiriting to most strangers, but in Carolus curiosity was perhaps the strongest emotion and he felt as he looked across the marshy levels that this area might well have secrets worth probing. He could believe that people led stealthy lives, obeying strange impulses and beliefs. Though mystery could belong as much to brightly lighted streets and conventional citizens, there was something in an atmosphere like this, the chilly river mist and the desolate landscape. His interest was thoroughly aroused not by the prospect of whatever mumbo-jumbo would be revealed, but by the effects of it. Probably much interbred, the people here, however much belonging to the sceptical twentieth century, might have links with a superstitious past, might know things that townsmen twenty miles away had succeeded in forgetting.

The name Guys seemed promising, not because of Guy Fawkes or any such recent bugaboo, but for an older connotation which he had thought of last night. He had supposed Clibburn to have an Old High German origin; could not Guys have the same and come from *geiz*, the word for goat? Goats

were the devil's animals in popular superstition and there was no doubt that superstition *was* popular hereabouts.

John Stainer's attitude was impressive, too. A fellow parachutist of long ago, a man of humour and courage, had talked quite seriously of being frightened by phenomena which he could not describe, which sounded in themselves almost silly, but which had disturbed his whole life. What, Carolus asked himself prosaically, what was going on?

It was doubtless chance which made the first human being he saw in the village of Clibburn a twisted little man, not much more than a dwarf, who hobbled along in the same direction as his own. Carolus pulled up and asked for the rectory. The man blinked and stared.

'The rectory?' he said as though he could not believe his ears. 'You want the rectory?'

He had a high-pitched voice.

'That's it. Mr Stainer.'

'Father Stainer, he calls himself,' said the man and continued to stare. 'I dare say he'll be at home now. He doesn't come out much these evenings. I don't blame him. It's raw out and he's not used to these parts. I don't suppose you are, if it comes to that.'

'No,' admitted Carolus, and waited for the information he sought.

'I thought not. I've never seen that motor car round here.' He seemed to recollect himself. 'That's the priest's hiding-hole over there.'

It was impossible to tell whether the term was used facetiously or in spite. He certainly did not smile as he pointed to a fairly large house built in Victorian style of red brick, a typical English parsonage of the last century.

'Thank you,' said Carolus.

'There's no call to thank me. Anyone could have told you. I don't have anything to do with all that myself.'

'All what?'

'Popery. I'm chapel,' said the man curtly.

'Ah,' said Carolus. There did not seem much else to say.

'Bowling and scraping. Incense is an abomination unto me. Are you one of those?'

An ambiguous question.

'I'm a friend of Mr Stainer's.'

'I don't say there's anything wrong with the man himself. His ways don't suit ours, that's all. Dressing the boys up in scarlet and lace. Mass, he calls it.'

You know where it leads to, all that?’

‘No. Where?’

‘To hell. That’s where. You better tell him that. I’ve told him often enough.’

‘I will,’ said Carolus. ‘Would you tell me your name?’

‘Smith. Ebby Smith. He knows me. I’ve warned him. Renounce the devil and all his works, I said.’

‘Ah, yes. The devil,’ said Carolus. ‘Do you get much of him round here?’

Ebby Smith gave him a last hostile look and hobbled away.

The rectory door was opened by a cheery woman wearing a bright blond wig.

‘The Rec’s expecting you,’ she said, with a toothy but welcoming smile. ‘He’s in the stud.’

Carolus, not yet accustomed to this passion for abbreviation, was slightly puzzled, but said, ‘Thank you.’

‘I live here,’ she explained, ‘with my husb. Chuck your coat down there—I’ll put it away. The stud’s down the pass. You’ll find him there writing his serm. I’ll bring you both some tea. Like crumps? Good.’

Carolus found John in the room indicated, but he was not writing his sermon, or anything else. He was dozing by a big log fire.

‘I ought to have prepared you for Mrs Lark,’ said John when they had exchanged greetings. ‘She’s a good soul but a little difficult to follow. I don’t mind being called the Rec but the Sacs for the Sacraments and mats for matins are harder to take, while I had to draw the line at the Blessed Vir. She has an invalid husband whom I rarely see.’

‘The house is far too big for me and the Larks share it, and in return she feeds me, assisted by what is known as occasional help from the village. Mrs Lark keeps remarkably cheerful so I don’t complain. She must have been rather a surprise for you.’

‘I was prepared for eccentrics,’ said Carolus. ‘I asked the way of a character named Ebby Smith.’

‘Oh, You did. Yes, character’s right. He lives in a tiny cottage with an enormous family and gives his congregation fire and brimstone in a bethel down the road every Sunday. He thinks I’m a sort of pimp for the Scarlet Woman. A curiously old-fashioned point of view. Nowadays I’m more used to being considered a credulous but harmless fool so ignorant of elementary biology that I believe in God. Ebby at least does that.’

‘And the corollary?’

‘I wouldn’t know. Could be I suppose. Good. Here’s the tea. Thank you, Mrs Lark.’

‘I told Mr Deene there were crumps,’ said Mrs Lark. ‘I forgot—they’re muffs. But they’re nice and hot with plenty of butt. You’re not slimming, are you? No, you don’t need to.’

Very pleasant, thought Carolus, looking at the bright fire and the comfortable chairs, the silver tea-things and the muffins. Only someone born and bred in Great Britain understands the attraction of all we mean by tea, he thought; not just the infusion that we drink, but the happy associations of it, fireside in winter, and sometimes in the garden in summer. He had a pleasant sense of being cosily shut in here from the murky evening and all that was forbidding and dangerous in the night.

‘I was going to tell you,’ said Mrs Lark to John, ‘Con Horse rang up while you were asleep.’

John sounded a mite impatient.

‘Horseman?’ he said. ‘What did he want?’

‘Said he didn’t want to disturb you, but could he look in early this eve? I said oke and he’ll be round about six.’

‘He didn’t say what it was about?’

‘No. Didn’t sound urge, though. Got all you want? Good. I’ll leave you to it and nip back presently for the tray.’

Carolus watched her exit with some amusement. She had a springy walk.

‘She really makes me far too comfortable,’ John confessed. ‘A real daughter of Martha. The husband’s a bit of a trial to her. He is paralysed in both legs. A motoring accident in which she was driving. Terribly hard luck, but one wishes he would sometimes count his blessings instead of becoming so embittered. She’s an angel with him. Pushes him round in his chair and does everything for him as well as looking after my meals.’

‘Are they Guys people?’

‘No. She’s from London. A manicurist. He was quite a successful insurance agent before the accident.’

‘Any known connections with the “goings-on”?’

‘No. But some rather cruel habits. He has a powerful air-rifle and pots at birds from his push-chair. Childish, I know, but repugnant to me. I had to stop him doing it in the garden. I’m fond of birds. He took it badly when I

told him I wanted them left in peace at least on my little bit of ground. "Vermin," he said. "Rats with wings." A most disagreeable figure of speech I thought. And he doesn't seem to appreciate his wife in the least.'

'Sounds most unattractive,' said Carolus. 'Tell me a little more about Horseman before he comes.'

'Connor? He's a very good chap. A great help to me in the parish. The young crowd seem to love him and he's in everything. MC at the village dances, president of their cricket club, and referees at football. A good mixer. I must own I know nothing about his books.'

'I do,' said Carolus. 'I looked him up in a writers' who's who last night. He has only written one, about seven years ago. It was a life of Mathew Hopkins.'

'Who was he?'

'The scourge of the witches. He probably caused the death by drowning of more harmless women than anyone in history.'

'Witchcraft again. I thought Connor at least was free from that.'

'He probably is. But he can make a study of the life of Hopkins without any kind of association, surely?'

'Of course. On the other hand, it could account for him settling in Clibburn. I have often wondered what made him do that.'

'If the place is all you say it could well account for it,' said Carolus. 'What do you think he's coming to see you about?'

'Something quite ordinary I expect. But you see the state of mind I'm in. I can't hear of someone coming to see me without wondering what has happened *now*. Ridiculous, I know, but that's how it is.'

Carolus nodded sympathetically and the two remained in silence looking into the red embers of the fire.

They were interrupted dramatically. The front door slammed and someone could be heard hurrying down the passage. The study door opened and a man limped into the room, out of breath and obviously unnerved. He did not seem to notice Carolus, but spoke to John Stainer in a loud, high-pitched voice.

'Someone tried to shoot me,' he said.

At such a moment John showed no nervousness. He stood up, almost pushed the man into a chair, and poured out a stiff whisky.

'Take it steady, Connor,' he said. 'Drink that and tell us about it.'

Connor Horseman did as he was told, and managed to nod to Carolus

when John introduced them. He was a very frightened man, a sight which neither John nor Carolus liked to see.

‘I don’t ... often behave like this,’ he said apologetically to Carolus. ‘I’ve had a ... disturbing experience.’

His confidence slowly returned and Carolus began to see him as he was in more normal circumstances, but he still did not like what he saw. He was burly and piggy-eyed and probably a good mixer, but behind the bonhomie, which would soon, Carolus felt, assert itself, there was a shifty watchfulness which only such a trusting soul as John would mistake for good nature.

‘Carolus is a very old friend of mine,’ John explained. ‘He’s staying with me for a bit. He’s accustomed to looking into strange events such as we have here. I hope you’ll give him the same confidence as you would me and tell us both what happened.’

Horseman managed a smile, but it did not promise the confidence John demanded.

‘Certainly. Of course. As soon as I get my breath. I ran all the way here.’

‘From where?’

‘From Chimneys.’

‘That’s the Murrains’ house,’ John explained. ‘Right opposite the churchyard. Go on, Connor.’

Three

'I was coming to see you about the dance on Allhallowe'en. The committee got on to me and I thought it would be a good thing. Clear the air a bit. Get things back to normal.'

'I should have agreed,' said John.

'I thought you would. I told the committee so. I said I would see you this evening and ask you about using the hall.'

'Who is on the committee?' asked Carolus.

'Mostly young people. Five of them. I saw them last night and promised to let them know this evening after I had seen you.'

'So five at least knew you would be coming here?'

'Five? Fifty by this morning. News travels fast in Clibburn, doesn't it, John? But they wouldn't know what time except that it would probably be after dark. We both work all day.'

'You're writing another book, I believe?' said Carolus.

Horseman seemed not to like the remark.

'I'm always writing another book,' he said sharply. 'It's my only visible means of support. I rang up and made the appointment with Mrs Lark and left home just before six, intending to walk.'

'You haven't a car?'

'It's in dock. Besides, it's only ten minutes on foot.'

'You had to pass the churchyard?'

'It's the only direct way. I should also pass the Murrains' house. It is, as you may have noticed, a very dark night and we have no street lighting except outside the White Horse. I met no one till I was approaching Chimneys, when I ran into Gerald Murrain. Almost literally. He said, "Good evening, Major Horseman," in that ingratiating way he has and went on towards the village. Something made me look after him. He was swinging an electric torch as he walked. Perhaps its light caught my eye and made me turn.'

'He hadn't shone it on you?'

'No. I hadn't seen it till I turned. I stood there for a few moments. The torch was invisible now and there was silence. Then, just as I was passing

Chimneys, there was a shot.'

'Where did the sound come from?'

'I *think* the churchyard. The shot spattered on the roof of the house.'

'So it was a sporting gun. You are sure of that?'

'As sure as one can be. Everything happened at once, but I'm pretty certain I heard it strike the tiles. I found myself running.'

'But if it struck the tiles it could scarcely have been aimed at you, surely?'

'I didn't wait to think of that. Mine was the normal reaction. Someone was shooting, and I expected the shots would get me.'

'Why?' asked Carolus.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Why? Why should you think someone was shooting at you?'

This seemed rather to floor Connor Horseman.

'What would anyone think? What would you think? There wasn't a soul about...'

'So far as you knew. It was a dark night.'

'But there was a light in a ground-floor window of Chimneys.'

'You noticed that?'

'Yes. Just before the shot. It was very bright, though some kind of thin curtains were drawn. I see nothing odd in my behaviour. The natural reaction was to hurry on. I can't move very fast—lost a leg in the war—but I didn't waste time, I can tell you.'

'You weren't expecting it?'

'That, if I may say so, Mr Deene, is a very silly question. Of course I wasn't expecting it.'

Unruffled, Carolus asked, 'You can't think of anyone who might want to take a pot at you?'

'Why on earth would they? I have no enemies that I know of.'

'Yet your first words were "Someone tried to shoot me." They do rather suggest that you thought the shot was meant for you.'

'I suppose I did at the time. I see now that, since it hit the roof, it couldn't have been aimed at me. What possible motive could anyone have?'

'You don't think it could have been a warning of some kind?'

'No. I do not,' said Horseman curtly.

Carolus spoke seriously.

‘Mr Horseman, we have only just met and you evidently don’t like my questioning you. Please believe that I am doing my best to help you and John. I must say frankly that I think you know some reason why that shot was fired. I do beg you to tell me what you know. I believe I can help you and I believe you need my help. After all, there’s nothing the police can do. A shot fired at a house roof won’t mean much to them, you see. It could have a hundred fairly innocent explanations even if they find out who fired it. But in the light of certain other things which we know about, it may have vital significance. And I mean vital. Won’t you please tell me all you know?’

‘I know nothing. There may be, as you say, a hundred explanations. But I certainly can’t think of anyone, here or elsewhere, with a motive for shooting at me. If whoever it was did shoot at me.’

‘Then there’s nothing more to be said.’

‘Oh, yes, there is. You haven’t heard the whole story. Soon after I started running I heard someone following me. Someone who could run fast. He came up with me and I should have known by the voice who it was if I had not seen enough to recognise him. It was Charlie Sloman.’

‘I’ve told you about him,’ put in John to Carolus. ‘The wild boy of the village.’

Horseman continued.

‘He’s not a bad lad. I’ve taken a bit of interest in him. Lent him one or two books. Tried to get him to do a job of some sort. I think in his dizzy way he appreciates it. I wouldn’t have been surprised to see him there at any other time. He’s always wandering about at night. Perhaps he’s not quite right in the head, poor boy, though in some ways he’s very intelligent. And I have never known him behave really badly.’

‘Why had he run after you?’

‘I don’t know. What he said was—“Are you all right, Major Horseman?” I said I was and asked why he had followed me. He just said, “I heard the shot,” then turned and ran back the way we had come. What do you make of that?’

‘The simplest thing. He wanted to know if you *were* all right.’

‘Obviously. But did he have anything to do with the shooting?’

‘I should have to know a lot more before making a guess at that. Things you decline to tell me.’

John, as peacemaker, interrupted.

‘Connor’s not a man to have enemies,’ he told Carolus. ‘Quite the contrary. He’s very much liked around here.’

Horseman seemed to cheer up and be more his hail-fellow-well-met self.

‘Yes, I think you’ve got me wrong, old chap,’ he said to Carolus. ‘You detectives see sinister things where none exist.’

If there was one thing Carolus disliked more than being called a detective it was being addressed as ‘old chap’. But he said nothing more for a time.

The thing is,’ Horseman said brightly to John, ‘do we go on with the dance, or don’t we?’

‘Of course,’ said John, smiling. ‘Let joy be unconfined. We may all be imagining things. The youngsters want it, anyway. They have their own band,’ he added to Carolus.

‘And a jolly good one,’ said Horseman. ‘The Sarawaks.’

‘Why not The Warlocks? Or The Fetisheers?’ suggested Carolus.

Horseman smiled.

‘Or The Necromancers. Or The Hoodooists. They’re good fellows, though, and really enjoy themselves.’

But Carolus had another shot in his locker.

‘I read your book on Mathew Hopkins,’ he lied. ‘You seem to have made quite a study of witchcraft. Have you found anything to interest you in Clibburn?’

Horseman laughed.

‘Oh, come now. My book was a serious consideration of the subject. I’m not interested in poor Alice Murrain with her love potions. Anything here is old-fashioned “wise woman” stuff.’

‘Weren’t Mathew Hopkins’s poor old women much the same?’

‘Yes, but people believed in them then.’

‘And they don’t now?’

‘Of course not. It’s a joke.’

‘I hope you’re right,’ said Carolus seriously.

‘You don’t mean to say you believe in all that stuff?’

‘I don’t believe in what is called the supernatural. The word is a contradiction in terms. Supernatural to me means simply hitherto unexplained.’

‘Too deep for me, I’m afraid.’

‘But I do believe,’ Carolus continued unperturbed, ‘that there are people

whose faith in such things makes them act in wholly illogical and sometimes criminal ways. There have been cases of human sacrifice quite recently. One should never underrate the power of a religion which to oneself may make nonsense.' He turned to John Stainer. 'Yes, John, I am converted to your view. There is evil of a certain kind in this community. I should like to stay here till I learn what it is and attack it at the roots if I can.'

'Good for you,' said John.

'And I would like to make a last appeal to you, Horseman, to help me by telling me what you know.'

'Oh, Lord. That again. There's nothing,' said Horseman angrily. 'Do you think I'm a liar?'

'Since you ask me I'm afraid that in this matter I do.'

'Carolus!' said John unhappily.

'That's all right, Rector. I asked for it. Perhaps you think I'm making up the story of a shot?'

'We'll soon clear that up,' said John decisively. He was evidently glad to do something to relieve the tension.

The others watched him go to the telephone and dial a number.

'Mr Murrain? Yes, good evening. I'm sorry to bother you with what is probably unimportant, but did you hear a shot somewhere near your house tonight? *No*? About six, it would have been. You heard nothing?'

Horseman stood up.

'Let me speak to him. He's lying,' he said excitedly as he grabbed the instrument.

'Murrain? This is Horseman. You remember meeting me this evening? You *don't*? But you spoke to me. A few yards from your house. Are you daring to suggest that I'm mistaken? You said, "Good evening, Major Horseman," and some moments after that a shot was fired. What the hell do you mean delusions? I don't have delusions. Your wife would have heard it? I don't know anything about that. She may not have been at home for all I know. But there was certainly a shot. It hit your roof? There was a pause. 'Very well. I shall go to the police about this. We'll see who's lying then.'

He slammed the receiver down.

'What a liar! He must have heard it. He can only have been a few yards away. There *was* a shot.'

'I've never had the slightest doubt of it,' said Carolus calmly.

'Then why did you call me a liar?'

‘It wasn’t on the question of whether or not there was a shot.

What I disbelieved was that you cannot account for it.’

‘I’m afraid I’m on Connor’s side over this, Carolus. I’m sure if he knew of any explanation he’d tell you.’ John sounded worried.

‘I hope so. Have you any crack shots in the village?’

‘I suppose I’m stupid,’ said John. ‘But I can’t think that a crack shot would have hit the roof at a few yards—whatever he was aiming at.’

‘No. But have you?’

‘There’s Drummer Sloman. That’s Charlie’s elder brother. He has the reputation of being able to hit anything at any range. Exaggerated, of course. But I believe he is pretty deadly. As you know, I don’t like shooting. As a so-called sport, I mean. Birds have a right to their lives. On the other hand, Drummer’s a sensible boy. He wouldn’t pot at Murrain’s roof for no reason.’

‘Or miss anything at a few yards.’

‘Not if he could see it. It was very dark tonight.’

‘You’re both forgetting something,’ said Carolus. ‘The fight was on in a downstairs window of Chimneys. Is there a hedge in front of the house?’

‘No. A low brick wall.’

‘Then someone passing that window would be seen plainly in outline from the churchyard. For a moment or two, I mean.’

‘By Jove, I believe he’s right!’ exclaimed Horseman. ‘But why didn’t he hit me, then?’

‘First we have no reason to suppose it was Drummer Sloman. It might have been anyone who wanted to kill you. Or give you a warning.’

‘That brings us back to square one.’

‘Exactly.’

Mrs Lark looked in.

‘Sorry I forgot the tray,’ she said, smiling. ‘Will Mr Horseman be staying for sup?’

Horseman stood up.

‘No, thanks, Mrs Lark,’ he said. ‘I must be running along. Sorry to have stayed so long, Rector.’

‘I hear you’ve had a bit of a shimozz this evening,’ Mrs Lark said to Horseman.

‘There you are! Right round the village at once! What did you hear, Mrs Lark?’

‘Only that you accused Mr Murrain of shooting at you when he’s never fired a gun in his life.’

‘This is preposterous! Who told you this?’

‘It was Lucy Smith, if you want to know. She happened to be round at Chim when you rang up. It’s what she said, anyway. But she’s rather a girl for a bit of scan, I’m afraid.’

‘She certainly is. Good night, John. I’m glad you agree about the dance. Good night, Deene.’

‘You’d better let me run you home,’ said Carolus. ‘My car’s outside.’

Horseman seemed to hesitate, then said, ‘Very kind of you, but it won’t be necessary. I live only ten minutes away. We mustn’t make too much of this. I don’t feel in the least bit threatened, or anything.’

To prove it he swung out of the front door and down the drive unconcernedly.

‘You dislike him, don’t you?’ said John when they had returned to the fire.

‘I distrust him. Was he in the Regular Army?’

‘No. Major was his wartime rank.’

‘I thought so, said Carolus and turned to another subject. ‘Why is the older Sloman called Drummer?’

‘Oh, that. He doesn’t play the drums and he wasn’t in the Army. But drummer is the country name for ferret. I told you he was a sportsman.’ John gave a hostile emphasis to the word. ‘That’s how he got the name, I understand.’

‘A good lad?’

‘Apart from his cruel habits with nets and guns and wires, I dare say he’s all right. The two brothers are certainly devoted. They live alone with their widowed mother. I prefer the wild Charlie to Drummer, but there’s nothing against either of them.’

‘What is Drummer’s job?’

‘Among others, he’s a gamekeeper. Xavier Matchlow has some shooting outside the village—known as Kirby Woods. He employs Drummer to look after it. It appears that *he’s* fond of shooting, too. Whether Drummer poaches more game than he looks after I don’t know. But he’s never been in trouble for poaching.’

Four

'I'm going to call on the Murrains,' said Carolus over breakfast.

'In the morning? They will think you're an opinion pollster or something.'

'I don't want any false pretences. This is not exactly a social call. Besides, if information spreads as quickly as you say, they'll already know who I am.'

He found Chimneys to be a four-square early Victorian or late Regency house, having a porch with two rotund pillars in the centre, and two windows on each side. There were trees behind the house but none between it and the road. Among the bright pink council houses of the village it had a somewhat faded and out-of-date look without the grace of a Georgian exterior.

A wide brick-paved path led to the front door and an iron handle set a spring-bell ringing somewhere in the rear portion of the house.

Carolus was prepared for most eventualities and was amused at what happened. The door began to move noiselessly inward with no sign of human agency. When it was fully open, revealing a rather mean staircase rising straight ahead of him, a woman's deep voice called, 'Come in, Carolus Deene.'

Carolus, who considered this sort of thing an insult to his intelligence, replied cheerfully, 'Thank you, Mrs Murrain.' Then he forcefully swung the door towards him revealing, as he anticipated, Gerald Murrain standing behind it.

'Call that a conjuring trick?' he said. 'Remind me some time to show you how to make a door jump off its hinges and do a *pas seul* round the garden.'

Murrain, with a sly obsequious smile, indicated the open door of the room to the right of the front door from which the woman's voice had come, and Carolus entered.

He found Alice Murrain to be a big woman wearing old-fashioned clothes, including a silk blouse with a high neckband. Her face was pasty and the dark eyes, peering sharply from above the unhealthy white cheeks, had a curious feline vivacity.

'We were expecting you,' she said.

'So I see. Very kind of you,' said Carolus brightly.

‘Will you have a glass of Madeira?’

‘Thanks, but it’s too early for me. I came to see you both about this ridiculous affair of the shot fired last night. Why on earth did your husband say he hadn’t heard it? Horseman’s not a complete fool, you know.’

Murrain, who had followed Carolus into the room, seemed about to speak, but his wife anticipated him. Carolus had a feeling that his breezy approach had made them change their prearranged line.

‘He didn’t hear it. He was out of earshot by then.’

‘How did he get out of earshot? Broomstick, levitation or motor-cycle?’

‘He is a fast walker. But I heard it. It struck the roof above my bedroom window, which was open. I was in the room at the time.’

‘I see. Lucky it didn’t hit you.’

‘Not lucky, Carolus Deene. There is no such thing as luck. Everything is fore-doomed.’

‘I dare say. How did you account for a shot being fired at your roof after nightfall? Did you think it was intended for you?’

Alice Murrain closed her eyes for a moment, then said in an oracular voice, ‘The foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines.’

‘I say, don’t go into a trance, will you? I can do that too, but I always think it’s so ill-mannered. What’s this about foxes?’

Gerald Murrain broke in.

‘We’ve lost a number of chickens lately,’ he said lugubriously.

‘That’s better. Vines are so improbable, whatever the *Song of Solomon* says. But you don’t have foxes on the roof, do you?’

Alice Murrain sighed.

‘I let it be known in the village that I wanted the fox destroyed.’

‘And you thought someone was having a go? But that doesn’t account for his hitting the roof.’

‘You must account for that, Carolus Deene.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call me “Carolus Deene” in that Cromwellian sort of way. There is really no need to behave like that with me. Or to try to stare me out. I know all about the old Evil Eye lark.’

‘You are a sceptic, Mr Deene,’ said Alice Murrain with the suggestion of a smile.

‘No. I’m a Catholic. If I thought you were in earnest I’d make the sign of the cross at you. Then according to tradition you’d have to disappear in smoke, which would be a pity because I’m enjoying our chat. Let’s all drop

the dramatics and behave like reasonable people.'

Alice Murrain showed no displeasure at this suggestion. Her composure seemed impregnable.

'What is reasonable to one person may not be so to another. We all have our standards.'

'Quite. Who fired that shot last night, Mrs Murrain?'

'I don't know.'

'Then couldn't you get out your crystal ball and have a look-see?'

'I am not a fortune-teller.'

'No. More of a misfortune-teller, I understand. But by one means or another, what you call reasonable or what I do, you must surely know who it was?'

'I'm afraid not. It is a matter for your kind of investigation or deduction, not for mine, if I have any.'

'What about your Second Sight? Isn't that part of your equipment?'

Mrs Murrain smiled.

'Like most sceptics you are very credulous. You really shouldn't believe all you're told in Clibburn.'

'No. But I believe what I see. Last night I saw a very frightened man and I want to know the explanation. I don't see why you shouldn't make it easier. I shall find it in the end.'

Then, for the first time in the interview, Carolus had a shock. In the same monotonous, good-humoured voice Alice said, 'If you live long enough.'

Carolus recovered quickly.

'If, as you say, I live long enough. You wouldn't be trying to scare me to death, would you, Mrs Murrain?'

'People sometimes scare themselves to death.'

'Yes. That's true too, but it doesn't get us much farther, does it?' He turned suddenly and rather savagely on Gerald Murrain, who had been sitting uneasily near the door. 'Why did you start waving that torch about last night?' he asked.

Once again Alice interrupted.

'That is the kind of questioning I will not permit in my house. I have put up with a good deal of impertinence from you, but don't suppose you can behave like an investigating detective.'

Carolus ignored this, and, still looking at the wretched Gerald, said,

‘And why did you lie to Horseman about the shot?’

‘Will you kindly leave the house?’ said Alice.

‘Of course. At once. But I must tell you both before I go that for me you’re just a pair of suspects. The people of Clibburn may believe that you can fly through the air on broomsticks and put curses on their crops, or what have you, but to me you’re plain Mr and Mrs Murrain, suspects in an investigation.’

Alice had risen to her feet.

‘Suspects of what?’ she asked haughtily.

‘Murder,’ said Carolus, and without looking back passed out of the house, leaving the two to decide what murder he meant.

He had not achieved much, but Alice Murrain had achieved nothing at all if she had really hoped to intimidate him. On the other hand, she was surely too intelligent to mouth one of those ‘Beware the Ides of March’ warnings.

Just as he was approaching the gate Ebby Smith became visible, seeming to materialise near a shrub in the border, looking like a malignant leprechaun if there is such a thing.

‘Hullo there,’ called Carolus. ‘We meet again. Are you part of the circus here?’

‘I work here, Mondays and Thursdays.’

‘Feeding the chickens?’

Ebby Smith gave him a guarded look, then said, ‘Oh. Ah. The chickens.’

‘I hear they’ve been losing some of them lately.’

‘Not that I know of. I only come on Mondays and Thursdays.’

‘So you said. No foxes about on those days perhaps?’

‘Foxes? What are you talking about? I must get on with my work. You’re in danger, mister. I’ll tell you that for nothing. Mortal danger.’

‘What of?’

‘Perdition, that’s what. The devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.’

What a day this is for quotations! thought Carolus, and remembered that the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.

‘Do you think he has a gun?’ asked Carolus.

Ebby looked up.

‘What’s that?’

‘A gun. Like the one fired last night.’

This brought a hostile stare to Ebby’s wrinkled face.

‘Take heed of what I’m telling you and go!’ he said. ‘Go! There’s no room for you in this place. You’re in with the Rector and all his works. Go while there’s yet time.’

‘You said that bit well, Ebby. But next time someone tells you to talk like that to me, tell him—or her, for that matter—not to waste your time. Call down wrath on your congregation on Sunday and don’t let’s quarrel.’

Ebby said something that he would not repeat in his bethel or anywhere else, and Carolus laughed in a friendly manner and walked away.

From the road outside he glanced at the roof but, as he expected, saw nothing unusual.

Back at the rectory he met Mrs Lark in the hall.

‘Hullo,’ she said. ‘Been round the vil? Not much to see, is it? The Rec’s in the stud with Charl Slo.’

‘Did Charlie Sloman call of his own accord?’ asked Carolus.

‘Well, the Rec told me if I saw him in the vil to bring him back if I could. He didn’t need much persuas. Funny boy. I don’t think he’s as simp as they say.’

Carolus had the same impression when he saw Charlie Sloman sitting bolt upright in a straight chair, looking alert and watchful rather than absent-minded.

John explained that he had sent for him ‘to tell us about that shot last night.’

‘Yes, well, I heard it,’ said Charlie Sloman.

He appeared to ignore the presence of Carolus and kept his eyes on John, but from time to time he gave quick, furtive glances at Carolus.

‘Where were you when it was fired, Charlie?’ Carolus asked.

Charlie continued to stare at John.

‘Round about the church,’ he said.

‘In the churchyard?’

‘Thereabouts.’

‘But you didn’t see who fired it?’

‘No. I didn’t see anything. Just heard the bang, that’s all. Hell of a big bang it seemed to me.’

‘Was it near you?’

'Pretty near. Least, it seemed to be. I thought my ears was blasted.'

'If it was so near you must have seen who fired it?'

'No, I didn't. It was pretty dark.'

John broke in.

'But you're always around at night, Charlie. You must be able to see your way about.'

'Some things I can. Didn't see a thing last night. Just heard this bang.'

'Was it behind you or in front of you?' asked Carolus.

'That I couldn't say. It didn't half give me a start, going off like that.'

'It was actually *in* the churchyard?'

'Must have been.'

'And you were too?'

Charlie looked cautious.

'Round there somewhere,' he said. 'Can't remember just where.'

'Who do you think can have fired it?'

'Can't say.'

'But why was it fired, do you think?'

'No idea at all. Unless it was the fox.'

Carolus recognised this as a break-through and followed it up.

'What fox?'

Charlie seemed to realise he had said too much.

'I did hear that Murrains had been troubled with a fox after their chickens.'

'Where did you hear that?'

'Can't say. Someone must have told me.'

'And when you heard the shot you thought, Ah, that's someone firing at that fox of Murrains.'

Charlie brightened. 'Ah. That's it. That's what I thought.'

'Who did you think it would be?'

'Couldn't say at all. Might have been anyone. Lots knew about it.'

'It might have been your brother, for instance?'

'Drummer? No. Wouldn't have been him. Not Drummer, it wouldn't have been.'

'Why not? He must have known about the fox.'

'May have. I couldn't say. But it wouldn't have been Drummer. He'd have

told me if he was going after it. Besides, he was out ferreting over in Kirby Woods, a long way away. On his motor-bike, he was, and wouldn't be back till after midnight. No, it wasn't Drummer.'

'Did he take his gun with him?'

'What gun?'

'He's got a gun, hasn't he?'

'Oh, yes. He's got a gun all right. He's a gamekeeper, isn't he? But he didn't take it last night.' 'How do you know?'

'Stands to reason. On a motor-bike? To go ferreting? Besides, I saw it at home when I got in. It wasn't Drummer fired that shot.'

'Then who was it?'

'Couldn't say. Couldn't say at all.'

'Square one,' put in John.

'It wasn't you, was it, Charlie?'

The little bluff failed. Charlie grinned.

'No. It wasn't me. Why not? Because I can't fire a gun. That's why not. Drummer won't let me handle one. I've got to be going now, Mr Stainer.'

'Just a moment, Charlie. Did you hear where that shot went?'

'Some say it hit the roof of Murrain's house.'

'Yes, but did you hear that at the time?'

'I only heard that bang. Nothing more. It may have hit the roof, for all I know.'

Carolus had waited to ask the crucial question.

'What made you run after Major Horseman and ask if he was all right?'

Charlie looked confused.

'I don't know. I thought he might have been hurt by the shot.'

'Oh. You had seen him passing?'

'Must have done, I suppose. I don't rightly remember.'

'You don't remember much, do you, Charlie? I wonder why you don't want to help us?'

'I want to help you all right. Anything I remember. But I can't tell you what I don't know, can I?'

'No. But you can tell us what you *do* know. Unless you're afraid of Mrs Murrain.'

'*Her?* I'm not afraid of her. She can't do anything to me, though I dare say she'd like to. You have to believe in it for her to do anything to you.'

‘Believe in what?’

‘All of it. I don’t believe she can wish anything on you. Not after what Mr Stainer’s taught us.’

‘Do you think that shot was fired at her?’

The unexpectedness of this took Charlie off his guard.

‘At her?’ he gasped. ‘Trying to kill her, you mean?’ He recovered himself. ‘Whatever makes you think that?’ Then, gaining courage with what was evidently a new idea, he added, ‘Might have been, of course. How is anyone to tell? There’s plenty would like to see her out of the way, that’s certain.’

‘But not the one who fired that shot?’

Carolus nearly had him there.

‘Him?’ There was a promising pause before the old manner returned. ‘Shouldn’t think so. Whoever it was. Ten to one he was after the foxes.’

‘On the roof? And why do you say “him”? Women can fire guns.’

‘So they can. I just said him in a manner of speaking.’

He stood up, this time with obvious determination to reach the door and go. Carolus did not try to detain him further.

When Carolus was alone with John he said, ‘How would you like to be prosecuting counsel with that as a witness for the defence?’

‘All the same, I thought you came near getting somewhere once or twice. Did you get anything at all, Carolus?’

‘More than I hoped. Now you tell me, John, what you see as possible explanations for that shot.’

‘I’ll try. Not my own opinion, you mean, just possibilities on paper, as it were. First, it could have been an attempt to kill Alice Murrain, who was up in her bedroom. Then it might have been an attempt to scare her. Or to scare Horseman. Or to kill Horseman if the one who fired the shot slipped as he was firing. Or it might have been an accident—guns do get fired by accident. Or a shot at something else high up which missed its mark. I suppose it could have been a signal to be heard at some distance.’

‘All possibilities as we are using the term. Who do you think fired it?’

‘Almost anyone. Drummer probably had something to do with it, from the way in which his younger brother was protecting him. But there seems to me to be another possibility. What about Murrain himself? There might have been time for him to enter the churchyard by the lower gate and come back to face his own house. Horseman said, “I stood there for a few moments. The torch was invisible now and there was silence. Then, just as I

was passing Chimneys, there was a shot.” Murrain could have fired it, couldn’t he?’

‘The thought occurred to me. But I need to know an awful lot more before I even have a guess.’

Five

A storm rose in the night and woke Carolus from his heavy sleep. His window was wide open and the curtains were blowing into the room. When he went to half-close it he almost slipped on the rainwater which had blown in and lay in a puddle on the parquet. But there seemed to be no rain now, and when he had mopped up the water he stood for a moment looking out.

Yes, on a night like this he could understand how in this place older generations, more superstitious than today, had managed to frighten themselves with things that go bump in the night, and ghouls and ghosties, how in villages like this some faith in such demonry persisted. A white rag of moon seemed to be torn this way and that by the black boughs dancing in the wind, and there was the perpetually changing noise of a gusty night in a place of trees. It was not only nervous old people or children who kept away from churchyards or gibbets at night in this weather but quite intelligent adults. Carolus had always smiled at old rustic bogies, but he did not underrate their power over the credulous.

Then suddenly he ceased to muse philosophically and became alert, for a sound rose, seemingly from the shrubbery at the end of the garden, which was no part of the natural clamour of the night. He had never heard the howl of a wolf, but imagined it to be something like this, though he did not doubt that it came from a human throat. Someone was giving a signal.

He watched the shrubbery from which it seemed to come and heard it repeated. Then a light showed among the bushes, swinging from side to side.

The Larks slept on the other side of the house, so the signal could only be intended for him or John Stainer, whose window was beside his. Speculation on this was quickly answered because John's light was switched on, then off again, then on, to remain lighted for several minutes and finally extinguished. A few moments more and the front door opened and shut and he saw John Stainer, wrapped in his heavy black overcoat, crossing the lawn towards the shrubbery.

Carolus wondered whether he should follow and decided against it. If John had secrets from him they had nothing to do with what he was investigating and were thus no concern of his. Besides, he was chilled and the windswept rain had started again. He almost closed the window and

went back to bed. If these events had any relevant significance he would hear about them in the morning.

He did, though the information came rather unwillingly, he thought, from John. Over breakfast—'soss, bake and kid,' Mrs Lark called the kind of mixed grill she presented—John asked him if he had slept well.

'I had to get up in the night and close the window,' said Carolus. 'The rain was coming in. How about you?'

'Not well. I had a summons in the night.'

'Sick parishioner?'

'No. I forgot to tell you, Carolus, that I have an informant in the village. One of my choirboys whom I find absolutely reliable. He often hears things and passes them on to me, but doesn't like anyone to know it.'

'What did he have to tell you?'

'Something rather interesting. A relief in a way. It was about the Beacon.'

'That's the place you said had a bad name? Near where the little boy was found?'

'That's it. But there's rather more to it than that. The Beacon is a sort of archaeological monument. There are several great slabs of stone there, once part of a circle of stones, I believe. There is a piece about it in *Archaeologia Cantiana*, but it never seems to have attracted much research. I only know that down to the eighteenth century some kind of party was held there on Allhallowe'en. One of my predecessors at the beginning of the last century was quite worried about this and recorded it in his diary. It was not anything to do with the occult which troubled him, but the fact that it was the occasion for an annual booze-up and what he called lewd merrymaking. He attacked it and the squire at that time supported him, so the custom lapsed. But in recent years there have been rumours that something takes place at the Beacon on Allhallowe'en. No one seems to know what, and no one cares to investigate. It may all be local invention. And, anyway, what I was told last night was that nothing would happen this year.'

'You never told me about this.'

'I was really ashamed to tell you any more of these old wives' tales. The point is, nothing is going to happen this year.'

'No, John. The point is that it happened *last* year. And other years.'

'*May* have happened. But Billy Mason seemed quite convinced that it would be given a miss this time.'

'You *hope*.'

‘Oh, I can trust Billy Mason. He was quite definite about it.’

‘But how would he know?’

‘He’s the publican’s son, and hears most things. I suppose the word has gone round.’

‘By Mrs Murrain’s grapevine, I suppose. The one the little foxes spoil.’

‘You’re getting very sarcastic about this, Carolus. The information came as a great relief to me.’

‘But why did he have to bring it at night, howling like a wolf?’

‘Billy likes that sort of thing. Reads that kind of fiction, I suppose.’

‘I see. Did you tell the Gunnings I am going to call this morning?’

‘Yes. They’ll be very glad to see you.’

‘Then I think I’ll go at once. After all, that is the heart of the matter—the little boy’s death a year ago.’

He found Albert Gunning at his petrol station.

‘The wife’s expecting you,’ he told Carolus.

He was a heavy man with old-fashioned spectacles having thick lenses. He spoke civilly enough but seemed preoccupied.

As Carolus approached the bungalow Cicely Gunning came to the door. Carolus was surprised that she had been described as so much younger than her husband—he judged her to be well into her forties. She might have been described as a typical English housewife, if such a creature existed, down to her chintzy house-jacket and expression of good-humoured alertness as though she were for ever on the look-out for bargains in a supermarket. As Carolus soon discovered, she had rather more than the garrulity natural to her type.

‘Yes, the Rector said you would be round, Mr Deene, and I told him I’d tell you all I could. There’s some of them afraid to open their mouths, but Albert and I always say if you can help anyone by speaking out it’s best to speak out. So when Mr Stainer said you wanted to know all about it, I told him we were only too willing. Besides that, he’s a real friend as far as we’re concerned and I won’t hear any different. We’ve always been C of E, though there’s some of them go to the Roman Catholic church over at Redcorn since the Rector’s come.’

‘Why? Isn’t he so popular?’ Carolus managed to ask.

Cicely had been leading while talking towards the sitting-room and he found himself now amid a wealth of plastics and fibres interspersed with wrought iron, a most unpleasing combination, Carolus thought.

‘This is all my husband’s work,’ Cicely said. ‘All the wrought iron, I mean. He’s ever so clever with anything like that. Of course, his father was the village blacksmith, but he couldn’t have done anything like the work Albert does. Look at that fern-stand! Did you ever see such lovely ironwork? And it doesn’t matter what it is. He mended my silver teapot the other day and you couldn’t see where it had been broken. Sit down, Mr Deene.’

Carolus found himself on a wrought-iron chair with an inadequate cushion.

‘You were asking about the Rector. It’s not so much that he’s not popular,’ Cicely continued. ‘But there’s some say that, if he’s going to carry on with all these processions and images of the Virgin Mary, they might as well have the real thing. Then again you’d be surprised at how many have taken to Ebby Smith lately, which is right-down ignorance as I see it, because he does nothing more than shout hell and damnation at them on Sundays. Still, the Rector gets a decent few who don’t like to chop and change every five minutes.’

She paused for a moment and Carolus leapt into the breach.

‘Mr Stainer tells me you asked him to perform the rite of exorcism...’

‘That’s right, I did. Well, I’d read about it in the papers being done in Essex somewhere, and I didn’t know but what it might be some good as things were. It never came off though, because Mr Stainer couldn’t get hold of the right words, and it seems the Bishop was abroad. The doctor told me afterwards it couldn’t have saved Cyril, who got pneumonia that bad that all the iron lungs and penicillin and that which they have nowadays didn’t make a bit of difference, poor little chap. But what I want to know is what had he been up to that night? Well, it’s only natural, isn’t it? He was a strong, healthy little boy before it happened. There’s a lot goes on in this village, I know that, and there’s some of them wouldn’t think twice about doing anyone a mischief.’

‘You think some evil influence was brought to bear on Cyril?’

‘I don’t know about influence—if you ask me it was more than that. The way he talked while he was in delirium. Things you’d never believe he came out with, which could never have passed his lips if they hadn’t been put into his mind. It’s always been said that things go on up at the Beacon on Allhallowe’en, but I’d never believed it. Me and Albert don’t take much notice of stories like that.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘I don’t understand much about it, but it’s to do with the devil and that.

You don't need to believe it if you don't want, but it used to be said they'd offer sacrifices, like you read in the Bible.'

'Who do?' interrupted Carolus firmly.

'Ah. Now you're asking. If I could tell you that we'd know what to do, wouldn't we? And I'd do it, whatever it cost, with my little boy dying on account of it.'

'You think that?'

'What else could it have been? If you heard the things he said! I told the police, but they said they had evidence that nothing of the sort had happened that night. And the doctor said people *do* say extraordinary things when they're in delirium without anyone knowing how they got hold of them, and it seems Cyril's death was natural enough. He'd caught pneumonia and there it was. They didn't want to believe all this about the Beacon but I've never been satisfied, and never shall be for that matter.'

'I hope you're going to tell me what Cyril said that night, Mrs Gunning.'

'Oh, I couldn't possibly repeat a lot of it. Not to anyone.'

'You didn't make a note of it at the time?'

'I didn't need to. I shall never forget what he said, only it wouldn't be nice to use such words. I haven't even told his father some of it. Four-letter words and that, which I'm sure he'd never heard even at school, where some of the boys are from very rough homes.'

'Couldn't you explain it without embarrassment, Mrs Gunning? Do try.'

'Well, first it wasn't so bad, before he went right off, as it were. The first thing I thought was funny was him saying, "They all had animal heads, Mum," just as he might be telling me about one of these horror pictures. But I never let him go to any of those and we'd always been very careful what he saw on the telly. Well, you have to be, don't you? It's no wonder what you read about children in the papers when they're always showing them murders and that.'

'Please go on.'

'Then he started to cry something pitiful. He was shaking all over and didn't really talk sensible again. And all of a sudden he came out with a four-letter word. Worse than that, he said it with Our Lord's name. "— Jesus Christ," he said. Then he repeated it again and again. It was horrible. It made my flesh creep. Fancy that coming from a little boy who'd never said a wrong thing in his life!'

'What else?'

'He kept saying "Blood!" At first I thought he was trying to swear and

hadn't got it right, then I realised it was blood he meant. He'd seen blood somewhere because he tried to wash his hands, like.'

'I understand there was some blood on him when his father found him.'

Cicely did not seem to want to dwell on this.

'I soon washed that off,' she said. 'But what was to me the worst thing of all, he began to make a noise like a sheep.'

'Or goat?'

'Goat it could have been. He didn't seem able to stop, but went on Ma-a-a for a long time. I asked him whatever he meant, but he couldn't hear me. There were one or two other words he said I could scarcely catch. "Black!" he said two or three times, and "knife" and "home". Then he called out a name, a horrid name I'll write down for you because it doesn't sound at all nice.'

On a piece of paper Cicely wrote in block letters SHAITAN.

'There. What do you think of that?'

'The obvious conclusion is that either your boy had been put under hypnosis by someone skilled in it who had a very nasty mind ...'

Cicely jumped to her feet and grew very excited. She rushed out to the front door and called her husband.

'There you are!' she said. 'What did I tell you? It was a mesmerist done it! Mr Deene just said so!'

'I said it could have been hypnosis,' said Carolus. 'But although it seems fantastic in this day and age one must consider another possibility. What remained in Cyril's mind in delirium could be the result of his having actually witnessed some kind of Black Mass.'

'That's what I say,' Albert sounded solemn. 'He must have seen them at it up at the Beacon. I told the police but they wouldn't have it. "There is no such thing," one of them told me. And you wouldn't think there could be, would you?'

'What I say is,' put in Cicely, 'if he had seen something of that sort it might have been a film company. I wouldn't put it past one of them. It may look black against people round here, but you can't really imagine it, can you?' she asked, once again wavering in her suspicions. 'There's some of them I don't think much of, I *do* admit, but not getting up to anything like that. Or using that language.'

'The word that so much shocks you is another form of "Satan", Mrs Gunning.'

'So it may be, but it doesn't sound nice, particularly when it's said by a little boy who's been brought up not to listen to such things.'

'Did Cyril mention the name of anyone he knew?'

'No. Only young Doug. That was his mate, the boy he ran around with sometimes. "Doug!" he shouted once. I took no notice of it at the time.'

'Who are Doug's parents?'

'He's Ebby Smith's youngest, but you'd never have said so. You couldn't meet a nicer youngster. *He* knew nothing about it.'

'Did you ask him?'

'No. I didn't. Ebby wouldn't have liked anyone asking about that. And soon afterwards he went away to live with his auntie at Redcorn, so I never had the chance.'

'Did the police know he called out that name?'

'I never thought to mention it. He was always on about Doug so it was nothing unusual.'

'I said at the time we ought to ask,' put in Albert. 'But we were both upset.'

'Of course. I quite understand. And thank you both for telling me all you have,' said Carolus, rising hopefully.

'It's only right,' said Cicely, 'when anyone's trying to find out the truth.'

'I'm different to Mrs Gunning,' Albert announced. 'She doesn't know what to think and never has since that night. I *do* believe that something went on up at the Beacon which was the cause of it all with Cyril. It's all very well of her to say that it couldn't be the people round here, but I'd like to know who else it was. They say it's gone on from ancient times and I don't think it's a joke, like. I've got my own ideas what happened and who was responsible.'

'If it was, we should have known,' said Cicely. 'There's not much goes on here but what you get to hear of it.'

'Not if they didn't mean you to.'

Realising that to ask who 'they' were was a waste of time, Carolus made a more determined move for the door.

'Good-bye, Mrs Gunning, and thank you again,' he said with finality.

'I only hope you do find out what happened. I should sleep better at night if I knew.'

Carolus managed to leave the bungalow, but Albert followed him to the yard.

‘I tell you what, though, Mr Deene,’ he said. ‘I’d be careful if I was you. They’re a funny lot round here, and if they were to hear you’d been asking questions about them I wouldn’t put anything past them.’

‘Thank you,’ said Carolus.

‘I’ve no doubt you can look after yourself. But you have to watch out. I don’t like those people Lark up at the rectory, for one.’

‘They’re new to these parts,’ said Carolus.

Albert stared at him and Carolus thought there was a touch of hostility in his expression.

‘There’s others,’ he said.

‘Yes?’

‘You know who I’ve always thought had something to do with it?’

Carolus obligingly said, ‘Who?’

‘That Horseman. If I could nail that bastard I’d kill him. I’m damn sure he was to blame for Cyril’s death.’

‘You don’t think you’re prejudiced because he’s a stranger to Clibburn?’ asked Carolus, surprised at Albert’s sudden violence.

‘No. I don’t. And I’ve got reason for what I say. That night, when I was going up to the Beacon, I met Horseman.’

Carolus asked sharply, ‘Where?’

‘Well, it was some way away from the Beacon, perhaps a quarter of a mile, but I’m pretty sure he’d come from there.’

‘What time was this?’

‘Must have been round about half-past three or four o’clock.’

‘Was he alone?’

‘Yes. He seemed to be in a hurry. He was carrying a suitcase.’

‘A suitcase? Now that *is* extraordinary. Did you speak to him?’

‘I asked him, of course, if he’d seen Cyril. He seemed sort of vague, as though he was thinking of something else. “Cyril?” he said. “Oh, your little boy. No, I haven’t seen him.” Then he hurried on.’

‘Did you tell the police that?’

‘Of course I did. And they took a note of it, but I never heard anything more. That’s the police for you. But the more I’ve thought of it the more I’m sure he was in it. I hate the bastard, anyway. If I could prove ...’

‘But you can’t, Albert. If ever there was a matter in which we shouldn’t jump to conclusions, it’s this one. Perhaps the whole truth will come out in

time. Till then, I'd forget it if I were you.'

A rather ugly expression crossed Albert's normally good-natured face.

'Can't do that,' he said, as Carolus left him.

Six

Back at the rectory he found Mrs Lark standing in the hall and had the impression she was waiting for him.

‘There’s a p.c. for you,’ she said with a smile, ‘from Margate.’

From her manner he might have supposed that the postcard was one of those so-called vulgar ones, still common in seaside places, a highly ambiguous text illustrated by a brightly coloured representation of fleshy women in old-fashioned bathing costumes and men in straw hats. But when she handed it to him he saw that it was a view showing a row of houses overlooking the sea with all propriety. ‘Our window’, as Carolus learned from a written note, was ‘marked with an X’. It was from the Sticks. ‘Having a nice rest here,’ he learned from the text, ‘and hope you are doing the same. Stick has been shrimping. Yours respectfully, Mr and Mrs Stick.’

‘My housekeeper and her husband,’ Carolus said to Mrs Lark, who seemed to expect some explanation and had obviously read the card.

‘Bit old-fash, aren’t they?’ she said, smiling.

‘Very. That’s one of the things I like about them. They’ve been with me since the war. Both are what used to be called treasures when the genus existed. I’m always being told you don’t get that sort nowadays. Or any sort, for that matter. I’m spoiled.’

‘I notice they don’t put their address,’ said Mrs Lark.

The remark rather irritated Carolus.

‘On a postcard? Why should they?’

‘Oh, well,’ said Mrs Lark, tiring of the subject as Carolus put the card in his pocket. ‘The Rec’s out. Went about elev. Didn’t say where.’

‘He’ll be in to lunch?’

‘Prob. Nearly always is. Tell you what, if you’re not doing anything, would you like to have a chat with my husb? He doesn’t see many peep and would be glad of a chat. Come through to our part of the house.’

Carolus agreed, not without some curiosity, and Mrs Lark led him to a pleasant room overlooking what had once been a kitchen garden. Ronald Lark was in a wheel-chair.

He had a pale thin face, not cadaverous but taut. His expression suggested querulousness rather than suffering. He offered Carolus a thin

hand when Mrs Lark introduced them.

'I hear you're staying here. I can't think what brings you to Clibburn. It's a detestable place.'

'Don't say that, Ron,' Mrs Lark said cheerfully. 'I think it's rather fun.'

'Fun? My wife has a strange idea of fun. All we have here to while away the winter evenings is a spot of bogus witchcraft.'

'You've got the telly,' Mrs Lark pointed out.

'The telly!' Ronald Lark dismissed the whole world of televised entertainment with contempt. 'Will you have a glass of beer? It's all we have in the house, I'm afraid.'

He spoke like a man of some education and Carolus suspected him of considering himself his wife's superior, which in the narrowest sense he probably was.

'I must get back to the kitch,' Mrs Lark said, when she had put some beer on the table beside her husband.

'I don't know how my wife can stand the people here,' said Ronald. 'I don't have to see much of them, thank God, but from what I hear they're a lousy lot. Too much inter-breeding, possibly. Have you met a woman called Murrain?'

'Yes. I went to see her yesterday.'

'Phony, of course. But dangerous.'

'In what way dangerous?'

'Half of them are afraid of her. She has the most sinister influence. She couldn't make a good hell-broth to save her life, but people say she has the Evil Eye.'

'Interested in that sort of superstition?' asked Carolus.

'Not really, but you get a lot of it here. Are you?'

'Quite,' admitted Carolus.

'Then Matchlow's the man you want to see. He's an expert. Only it's hard to make his acquaintance.'

'I'm told his wife is more sociable.'

'Judith? Yes. Now there's a really charming woman. But she knows nothing about her husband's peculiar hobbies. "As long as he doesn't turn me into a toad or anything he can do what he likes," she says. I hope you'll meet her. She'll restore your confidence in ordinary people after so many exotic types. She comes here quite often and she and the wife get on like a house on fire. But I wouldn't have her old man in the house. He was mixed

up with Aleister Crowley and all that lot. Nasty piece of work.'

'I'm told he has one friend. A farmer named Garries.'

Ronald Lark gave him a somewhat wary look.

'I don't get about much in this bloody chair, but I've seen Garries in the village. The very last man you'd have associated with all this. A big, lusty old chap—typical farmer of the old school. But there are stories. He owns the ground round the Beacon. Been in his family for years.'

'Then how do you account for his friendship with Matchlow?'

'To my idea they're both mad. But then most of us are in this place. Matchlow has been seen walking back from Garries' farm in the small hours.'

Carolus shot out one of his disconcerting questions on another subject.

'I hear you're fond of shooting, Mr Lark?'

'I suppose Stainer has been talking to you? Fond of shooting? Not at all. I just can't stand birds. They're the con men of the animal world. Telling you all day long how marvellous they are, what sweet little things...'

'You mean their singing?'

'They don't sing. They whistle, squawk, croak, howl, hoot, usually at most inconvenient times and places. They are vermin. Rats with wings. Of course I destroy them. And poor sentimental old Stainer objects!'

'Perhaps he has seen enough killing,' suggested Carolus mildly.

'Could be,' replied Ron Lark unconcernedly. From that moment Carolus decided that the man's bonhomie was assumed and that underneath it he loathed Carolus and most other people. He could conceal his bitterness, speaking in a semi-facetious way of his hatred of birds, of the people of Clibburn and so on, but there was not much sincerity or good-nature in him. Perhaps he, too, was a little mad. 'Most of us are in this place,' he had said.

Mrs Lark rejoined them.

'The Rec's back,' she announced. 'He's in the gard.'

'I'll go to him,' said Carolus.

'So like you, Margaret,' said Ron sourly. 'I almost never see anyone civilised and when I do you have to drag him away.'

'I didn't...' began Mrs Lark, but Ron waved her aside and tried to bid Carolus a civil farewell.

Margaret Lark led him out by a side-door and they started towards a door in the wall, evidently leading to the main garden. But as Carolus let

her walk ahead on the narrow path there was a ping and he saw Ron Lark, his wheel-chair at the window. He was grinning and his air rifle was in his hand.

‘Just missed!’ he said. ‘Bastard was in the apple-tree.’

‘Better be careful with that toy,’ Carolus warned him. ‘Your pellet went quite near my head.’

‘Don’t worry! It wouldn’t have penetrated the skull,’ said Lark ambiguously. Then, as though he had said too much, added, ‘No power behind it.’

Carolus said nothing but walked on. When they had passed through the garden door he asked Margaret Lark how long her husband had exhibited this obsession with killing birds. Her reply and manner surprised him. She seemed to be near tears.

‘I don’t know,’ she said miserably. ‘Ever since I’ve known him.’

Another curious interview awaited Carolus that afternoon when he drove out to Garries Farm. The name had lost its apostrophe with the years—it may once have been the farm that belonged to Garries, but after so many generations it owned the name as much as they did and would have been Garries whoever farmed it. The house had been badly restored and enlarged in Victorian times, but there were remnants of a Tudor building.

He had a feeling from the first that he was expected, but not welcome. In the yard he met a young man, tall, rather handsome and friendly in manner, whom he took to be the son, George.

‘The old man’s in the sitting-room,’ George said. ‘Why not go straight in if you want to see him? Go by the back door—we never use the front. If I took you in he probably wouldn’t see you. He’s like that.’

Carolus soon realised what he meant. William Garries was not a friendly man. At first sight he looked, as someone had said, like the traditional farmer and into Carolus’s mind came an old verse learned in childhood—

The farmer sat in his big armchair
Smoking his pipe of clay,
While his buxom wife with right good cheer
Was clearing the dishes away

There was no buxom wife, but William Garries wore gaiters and on his heavy lined cheeks were white side-whiskers. He had had quite a lot to drink.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, in a surly voice.

Carolus told him his name.

‘What do you want?’

‘I want your permission to go up to the Beacon. I understand it’s on your land.’

Garries knocked out his pipe.

‘You don’t need my permission,’ he said angrily. ‘At least, it seems not. There’s scores of people go up there—trampling down my crops. Come in cars and talk about archaeology. I’d like to get rid of the bloody thing.’

‘But then there would be nowhere to meet on Allhallowe’en, would there?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Rumours, Mr Garries.’

‘What do you mean, rumours? Old wives’ tales in the village? You’re staying with Stainer, aren’t you?’

‘Yes. He didn’t say much about the Beacon, but it’s common talk.’

‘Common talk! And you’re supposed to be an intelligent man.’

‘An intelligent man can learn a lot from common talk. It’s common talk that a little boy died through going up there last year. Think there’s any truth in that?’

Garries looked across with evident hostility.

‘Shouldn’t think so.’

‘Where were you that night, Mr Garries?’

‘Are you asking me where I was that night? As though you were a bloody policeman taking a statement? You bloody impudent monkey! Get out of here before I knock you down!’

‘And where was Matchlow?’ Carolus continued coolly. ‘Were you two together?’

‘George!’ shouted Garries. ‘Turn this bastard out before I do him an injury.’

‘What I mean is,’ Carolus continued, ‘did you go up to the Beacon of your own free will, or had Matchlow the means of making you?’

Carolus was playing it by ear, but with every moment he felt on safer ground.

Garries sat down.

‘No one makes me do anything,’ he said. ‘Now get out or I’ll take a

bloody dog-whip to you.'

'No one?' persisted Carolus. 'Then hanging that crucifix upside down in the church was your own idea? It doesn't seem like it to me. More like the act of a madman, and whatever you are you're not mad.'

'Better come on,' suggested George after a glance at his father.

'Is Matchlow mad?' asked Carolus. 'Madder than the rest of this village, I mean?'

'I'll tell you who *is* mad,' said Garries furiously. 'Mad as a March hare. *You* bloody are, whatever your name is. Talking about crucifix upside down and God knows what. You ought to be locked up. And don't talk to me about Matchlow!'

'You mean he will be more intelligent when I meet him than you have been. That's quite possible. Because you haven't been very intelligent, Mr Garries. You've told me an awful lot you don't want me to know.'

'Oh, I have? I've told you to get out of my house, if that's information. Now GET OUT!'

George seemed embarrassed as he ushered Carolus out.

'I told you the old man was like that,' he said. 'What did you want to bait him for? You'd have learned a lot more if you had been civil.'

'Perhaps. But it would have been what he had prepared to tell me, not what came out spontaneously.' Carolus stopped and faced George Garries as they walked across the yard to his car. 'I don't know much about your father, George, but I think he is mixed up in something uncommonly like murder.'

George apparently could not believe his ears—or wanted time in which to consider what he should do.

'You *what*?' he shouted.

'And the same goes for you,' said Carolus quietly.

George, not the most decisive of young men, looked hot and angry, but seemed unable to decide how he should reply. Go for Carolus? He was younger and stronger and quite unafraid. Confide in him? Treat him with contempt? Leave him? Hi. decided on the last-named and without a word started to walk back to the house.

But he could not resist a last threat.

'If you come round here again,' he said, 'upsetting the old man with talk like that, I'll blow your bloody brains out.'

Carolus reflected that in this part of the world even the emptiest threats were of shooting.

On his way through Clibburn he drove to the only group of council houses, a chessboard of bright red brick, and asked where the Slomans lived. The door of a rather neglected semidetached house was opened by a little worried-looking woman who stared at him without speaking.

‘Mrs Sloman?’

‘Yes,’ she said, as though doubtful about her own identity.

‘It was your son I wanted to see.’

‘Which one of them is it this time?’

Carolus smiled.

‘Drummer,’ he said. ‘It’s nothing very much.’

‘What’s he been up to? There’s always something.’

‘He can give me some information.’

Mrs Sloman seemed if anything more perturbed.

‘Information? What information? He doesn’t know anything.’

‘Perhaps I could just have a word with him?’

It was notable that Mrs Sloman asked no question about Carolus’s authority.

‘Come in,’ she said. ‘He’s out the back—feeding his ferrets.’

Carolus was shown into the front room and told to sit down. After a few moments Drummer, a frank-looking, smiling lad in his early twenties, came in.

‘Hullo,’ he said. ‘You Mr Deene?’

‘Yes. And you’re the famous Drummer?’

‘Don’t know about famous, but that’s what they call me. Have a cigarette?’

‘Thanks. I’ve already met your young brother. He told me that on the night when a shot was fired from the churchyard you were out ferreting in Kirby Woods.’

To his surprise Drummer grinned.

‘Is that what he said? Good for him.’

‘Were you?’

‘Course I wasn’t. I was in the White Horse most of the evening playing darts with Bert Gunning and them.’

‘Then why did Charlie say what he did?’

‘I expect he thought I’d get the blame for that shot. Anything to do with shooting it has to be me. All I can say is, if I wanted to take a pot at

Horseman, I'd get nearer than Murrain's roof.

'So you weren't in the churchyard that night?'

'May have passed through it. Can't remember. Why do you ask?'

Carolus smiled.

'I'm doing what you're fond of—ferreting. Only for facts.'

'You're not the law?'

'No. Just an inquisitive friend of the Rector's.'

'I see. Well, I don't know what I can tell you.'

'I do, Drummer. Just why you took Charlie to the churchyard and let off a shot. Perhaps it was after a signal from Murrain, but I'm not sure about that.'

'You know a lot.'

'Not really. Young Charlie's very loyal to his brother. So loyal that he's apt to give the game away. He was positive it wasn't you. He did not see whoever fired, but he knew it couldn't have been you. How? Surely the only thing that could have made him so certain when we asked him about it was that it *was* you. If you see what I mean.'

'Charlie's a bit simple,' reflected Drummer irrelevantly.

'But it was you, Drummer?'

'I'm not saying anything. All I say is that whoever fired that shot wasn't out to hurt anyone. It stands to reason, if you think about it. With Charlie around? You can cut that right out. I don't see it matters, anyway. Horseman wasn't hit—not by a few yards.'

'Perhaps it doesn't matter so much as things stand. But if there's any more shooting it will. It will be evidence.'

For the first time Drummer looked rather disturbed.

'You mean, if anyone else was to be shot at, the one who fired that night would be suspected of both?'

'That's what I mean. Even if it wasn't shooting, but some other way. A full investigation of events in this village would certainly include questions about that shot. So let's hope there are no more incidents.'

'Like?'

'Like murder,' said Carolus briefly.

'You don't think there's going to be, do you?'

'I've never known a more likely background for it.'

'You could be right,' said Drummer. 'The place is full of ... well, you hear

a lot of things. I've thought of joining the RAF myself to get away.'

Carolus said nothing.

'There's too much gossip and hatred,' explained Drummer. 'You don't know who you can trust.'

'Or who can trust you. Say good-bye to your mother for me. If you decide to tell me any more, phone me at the rectory and I'll meet you where you like.'

'I'll remember that.'

Seven

Carolus found John Stainer in his study with Judith Matchlow, that reputedly 'down-to-earth' 'thoroughly nice' woman who was not interested in her husband's odd hobbies. Carolus was quite willing to accept the descriptions he had heard of Mrs Matchlow, though he noticed that she talked freely of Xavier Matchlow during the short time she was with John and himself. She spoke of him affectionately, yet as though his oddities were a private joke she shared with John.

'Xavier wants to meet you,' she said when she and Carolus were introduced.

'You should consider yourself honoured,' said John. 'Xavier Matchlow never seems to want to meet anyone.'

'Don't you believe it!' said Judith. 'Just lately he has become quite social. The Murrains were up at the house the other night—together. They make the oddest pair when they are dressed for visiting. And there's some kind of journalist named Poley Grant who has been around. I don't care for him. But Xavier particularly asked me to tell you, if I met you, that he would like to meet you and hoped you would drop in for a drink.'

'I certainly will,' said Carolus.

'I don't know what John has been telling you about him, but you'll find him really quite human. All this occult nonsense is really no more than a hobby. He met this man Crowley years ago and wrote for his paper *The Equinox*, and now collects books on the occult as he might collect books on gardening. I think his interest is entirely what you and John would call academic.'

'But it doesn't appeal to you?'

'Oh, not in the least. I'm a Mrs Feather. Perhaps that's why we get on so well. But Xavier never ceases to surprise me. Know what he told me yesterday? He's coming to the dance in the village hall on Allhallowe'en! Can you imagine it? I've had to dig out his dinner jacket. He'll be coming to church next, John.'

'I hope so. It would do a good deal to stop tongue-wagging.'

Carolus ventured a question, though he felt it somewhat presumptuous.

'How does your husband get on with Major Horseman? They would

seem to have much in common.'

'Not well. Not at all well, in fact.'

'That's a very sore point with us,' explained John. 'We don't feel he has given poor Connor a chance. He resented his coming to Clibburn in the first place.'

'Why?'

'It's the Major's attitude to much that interests Xavier,' said Judith. 'He calls Connor a charlatan and says the book he wrote about witches is "thoroughly ill-informed and superficial". He thinks that Connor has what he calls a patronising manner to the occult.'

'Do they meet often?'

'They don't meet at all. They had a terrible row about a year ago and since then don't speak. I daren't mention Connor's name. What will happen at the dance, where Connor is the MC, I can't think. But after all they are both civilised men and will know how to carry it off, I suppose.'

'Oh, yes,' said John, rather fatuously. 'I'm sure they will.'

Judith Matchlow had been thinking over the prospect of Carolus visiting her husband.

'Won't you come to dinner? I'm really quite a good cook and I don't often have an opportunity of showing off. Let's see, the dance is on Saturday and today's Thursday. Why not tomorrow? And you, John?'

'I should be delighted,' Carolus said.

But John cried off.

'I'd love to, but I can't. What are called parochial duties. Besides, I think Xavier should have Carolus to himself. With two first names like theirs they are bound to get on.'

'You could call yourself Johannes,' suggested Carolus.

John grinned. 'No. Really not. Though it's sweet of you, Judith.'

'Tomorrow at seven-thirty, then,' Judith said to Carolus as she rose to go.

And on the following evening, a dark and rainy one, Carolus drove punctually to the House.

It was called the House, not the Hall or the Park or the Manor, but it had been, for a century or so, regarded as the dwelling of the squire in that old-fashioned village and even now the older people thought of Xavier Matchlow as having some kind of precedence among them. There was no title in the family but there was considerable inherited wealth, and Xavier was the last of an eccentric family who had been able in the past to afford

their eccentricities.

He looked it. A smallish, delicate-featured man, he had fine grey hair carefully arranged about a face which fitted the old popular conception of a poet, sombre eyes under black-pencilled eyebrows and a petulant mouth. His voice was carefully modulated and his movements graceful. He wore a plum-coloured velvet smoking-jacket and chain-smoked cigarettes, using a holder.

‘I’m delighted to meet you,’ he told Carolus. ‘I have read your book *Who Killed William Rufus?* and found it most amusing. Scholarly too. That’s the way to treat history—as a criminologist. What will you drink?’

Carolus asked for his invariable Scotch-and-soda.

‘I suppose you expect me to drink dragon’s blood,’ he said. ‘Real dragon’s blood, I mean. But it happens that among my wife’s attainments is the making of an almost perfect dry martini. I take advantage of that every evening before dinner though I’m not a drinking man. How do you like our village?’

‘At present not at all,’ said Carolus.

‘Oh?’

‘It has a threatening air.’

‘You find that? But don’t you think it has probably always had that?’

‘No. I think it’s phony. There’s something, of course. Something going on, if I may use the expression. But people here seem to make the most of what there is instead of laughing at it.’

‘I see. You think *it*—whatever it is—is a joke?’

‘Not all, of course. I don’t think a small boy being frightened to death is a joke. Or a crucifix hung upside down. But the Murrains and all they stand for seem merely silly to me.’

Xavier smiled.

‘And I, Mr Deene? Merely silly, you think?’

‘I don’t know you at all, still less what you stand for. But if you took the late Aleister Crowley seriously I’m afraid I do.’

Xavier’s face darkened.

‘I did at the time,’ he said. ‘Oh, yes, I certainly did. But I was a young man then, you know. And very inexperienced. It takes considerable experience to distinguish the true from the false—in what is called black magic as in many other fields. Crowley had certain faculties. He wasn’t all charlatan. He had studied deeply, I might say religiously. But he exploited

his knowledge for unworthy motives. You see, he wanted disciples. His whole life was a search for disciples.'

'Interesting. A paranoiac, of course.'

'Of course. But he was not negligible. In some ways he was formidable. He had courage. Have another drink?'

'Thank you. And you continue his studies?'

'Oh, no. I dabble. I read and ... dream.'

'Pleasant dreams?'

'Interesting,' said Xavier Matchlow.

'You don't experiment?'

'Oh, no. Mine is an old man's hobby. If anyone thinks of experimenting with these things he needs to be young and fit and have all his wits about him. Otherwise accidents can happen.'

'You find that?'

'I *know* that. They happened to Crowley. They can happen to anyone who ... isn't entirely master of the situation.'

'But is any man, ever, in black magic?'

'No. And I don't much like that term, though in a qualified way I used it first.'

'It's a good old one, isn't it? We both know what it means.'

'I would prefer not to use it. No, I don't experiment. Or, if I do, not in a way to involve others. No one has the right to do that.'

Judith came into the room, letting in a delicious smell of cooking in which herbs and spices were distinguishable.

'Finished your drinks?' she said cheerfully. 'I'm just going to dish up.'

'Is the claret *chambré*?' asked Xavier.

'Of course, darling.'

'Then—' He glanced at Carolus. 'Shall we go in?'

Sitting at an oval mahogany table, polished to look like East India Sherry, and eating an excellent but in no way eccentric meal, Carolus forgot all magic but that of gastronomy.

Judith smiled.

'I knew you two would get on,' she said.

'Well, we haven't actually come to blows,' said Carolus. 'But that's not to say our discussion has been exactly cosy.'

'There are of course fundamental differences of opinion between us,'

said Xavier.

‘Then let them wait till after dinner. We don’t often open a bottle of the Chateau Whatsit.’

Smiling at his wife’s vagueness, Xavier masticated with every sign of contentment.

‘I hear you’re coming to the dance tomorrow,’ Carolus observed to his host.

Xavier looked up sharply.

‘I am. Yes.’

‘We long to know why,’ Judith told him.

‘Curiosity, perhaps. Or a stricken conscience.’ Xavier did not look in the least conscience-stricken. ‘I know so little of the people among whom I live. I could not even recognise many of them.’

‘It’s a bit late in the day to feel like that, surely?’ suggested Judith. ‘But the Rector’s delighted. He feels you could do so much to stop these silly rumours in the place.’

‘By showing that I don’t actually grow horns or have cloven hoofs? You mustn’t blame me for rumours.’

Why *was* he coming? Carolus wondered again. To show that he was not elsewhere?

‘I blame everyone who has taken part in any kind of quasi-magical performance here,’ said Carolus.

‘You’re not suggesting that I run around the Beacon on Allhallowe’en?’ said Xavier good-humouredly.

‘I suggest that a number of unidentified people did so last year with very terrible results.’

‘Then I’m afraid you’re more credulous than I thought, Deene.’

After this dangerous exchange the two men returned to Xavier’s study. It was now that Carolus deliberately brought up the name of Major Horseman. Xavier reacted at once.

‘I can’t stand the fellow. A philistine and an ignoramus.’

‘Rumour has it ...’

‘Rumour again.’

‘That you had a violent row with him shortly after Allhallowe’en last year.’

‘I don’t know when it was, but otherwise rumour’s right, for once. I told the fellow exactly what I thought of him. He curries favour with a certain

younger section of the villagers and writes ridiculous nonsense about witchcraft. He is an impostor, a blackmailer ...'

Carolus seized on that word.

'A blackmailer? What do you mean by that, Matchlow?'

Xavier tried to evade the point.

'Every kind of rotter,' he explained vaguely.

'But you made a specific charge. You said a "blackmailer".'

'Oh, come, we're not in court, are we?'

'You must have had something in mind when you said that.'

'Not really. I'm sure he's capable of blackmail. Whatever some of the young ones of the village think of him, there are people here who resent him very deeply. So deeply that I wonder he doesn't move away while he has a whole skin.'

'Perhaps he doesn't realise this.'

'I can't see how he can avoid it. He has been made aware of it often enough.'

'I see. That shot...'

'What shot?'

'Oh, come. You're not going to say you're so much out of the village that you never heard of a shot *at* or *near* Horseman a few nights ago?'

'I heard nothing.'

'Horseman was passing Chimneys, Murrain's house, on his way to the rectory after dark when a shot was fired from the churchyard.'

'Did it hit Horseman?'

'No. It struck the roof of Chimneys.'

'Then what's all the fuss about?'

'Horseman was badly scared.'

Xavier grinned.

'Perhaps that was the idea.'

'Perhaps. But why? You don't like the man, but he doesn't seem to do any harm.' Carolus leaned forward. 'He's no *threat* to anyone, is he?'

Caught off his guard, Xavier lost his calm.

'Threat? I should think not! How could he threaten anyone? He's a charlatan.'

'Then why was this—even in your opinion—an attempt to scare him away?'

'God knows. I told you he was unpopular.'

'Surely with all this ... magic about he could be scared away by less crude methods than a revolver shot?'

'Who knows any less crude methods? Alice Murrain, with her Evil Eye?'

'You, surely?'

'I? Do you think I would try to use poor old Aleister's tricks? I've told you my interest is purely theoretical. I've no doubt Aleister could have thought up something.'

A kind of glee came to his voice as he went on to talk of Aleister Crowley and Victor Neuburg and the rest of them in the days of the Great Beast's curious achievements. Carolus watched him closely as he talked. There was no doubt that Xavier Matchlow was what he had called Crowley, a paranoiac, and that in certain respects he was, as Carolus put it to himself, barking mad.

While he was talking the phone rang.

'Excuse me,' said Xavier calmly and politely, as he reached for the instrument.

He held the receiver close to his ear and Carolus could hear nothing. Xavier listened for a moment, then said, again with calm politeness to his caller, 'Would you mind ringing again in about half an hour's time? I'm engaged at the moment.'

'I should be leaving, anyway,' said Carolus. 'Thank you for ...'

No impatience was perceptible in Xavier.

'Judith's gone to bed, I expect.'

'Please thank her for a delicious dinner.'

'Delighted you could come. We must continue our discussion another time. I'm not driving you away I hope because of that call? It's of no importance really. Someone else with a problem.'

He came to the front door and watched Carolus get into his car. They called good night to one another as though they were old friends.

But once out of earshot Carolus reversed and drove back to a point at which he calculated his engine, confused with others, could not be heard from the House to stop. He drove on to a grassy verge.

Very cautiously he alighted and silently closed the door of his car. He waited some moments, then with care began to approach the House. There was light in an upstairs window, but the study in which he had sat with Matchlow had heavy curtains and he could only see one chink of light to

show that Matchlow was still there. He moved cautiously close to the windows and was relieved to find that one of them had been left slightly open when the curtains had been drawn. He came close to it and waited.

A hateful task. However exciting the chase, or however morally justifiable his actions, there were times when his old-fashioned bourgeois conception of gentlemanly behaviour revolted. To listen to the private conversation of another person, even if that person was a suspect, was repugnant to him. He had long ago conquered his squeamishness in practice, but still he could never feel comfortable in the act.

The rain had ceased and the night was so silent that he could hear everything from the room, Matchlow's clattering with a poker to stir the fire, even his striking a match for his cigarette.

When the phone rang again he heard each word, but Matchlow did not address his caller by name. There was a long pause while Matchlow listened to the other. Then he spoke crisply.

'I've told you not to worry about him.'

This seemed to be received with moderate protests.

'I've got all that in mind,' Matchlow said quietly.

Then, after listening to the other—restlessly, Carolus felt—Matchlow in his turn broke out.

'You won't? You'll do exactly as I tell you. Both of you.'

That 'Both of you' should have helped him to identify the caller. But it didn't. The suspects—or possible suspects—seemed to run in pairs. It could have been addressed to Ron and Margaret Lark, the Garries, father and son, Gerald and Alice Murrain, the brothers Sloman, the Gunnings, Ebby Smith and his daughter, even Connor and Mavis Horseman.

'Certainly,' Matchlow continued almost at once. 'You'd better remember that, next time you lose your temper.'

Finally Matchlow, in a harsh, decisive voice meant to silence all argument or objection, said: 'Not the slightest. Exactly as planned. Good night.'

Carolus heard the metallic sound as the receiver was returned to its holder.

He moved away swiftly and silently, keeping an eye on the curtains behind him to make sure they were not opened. Then he got under cover of the surrounding shrubs, for there were other windows from which observation might have been made without a light in the room.

Beside his car he found Charlie Sloman waiting. Charlie looked at him

with that strange mixture of near-idiocy and cunning which characterised him.

‘Hullo, Mr Deene. Forget something back at the House?’ he grinned.

‘Yes,’ said Carolus shortly.

‘You can drive much nearer than this.’

‘I know.’

Carolus was waiting for a lorry or car to pass to start his engine unheard. He smiled back at Charlie.

‘You’d better be getting home,’ he said in a friendly way.

Charlie did not move, but just then a heavy lorry used for collecting from the farms came noisily towards them.

‘Now you can start her up,’ said Charlie.

Carolus did so and drove away to the rectory. He wished he had not brought the car that night.

Eight

‘There’s a tel for you, Car,’ called Mrs Lark musically at lunch-time next day when Carolus came in.

The telegram had been handed in that morning in Margate. It was curt. ‘MRS STICK TAKEN HOSPITAL PLEASE COME.’

Carolus told John Stainer.

‘Looks as though I shall miss the dance tonight,’ he said. ‘Pity, that. I was looking forward to it.’

‘Oh, dear. I did hope you’d be there. I have the most uncomfortable expectations about this dance.’

‘Can’t be helped. Read this. Mrs Stick has been with me for more than twenty years. I must go immediately after lunch.’

‘Perhaps you might be back in time? If you find your housekeeper all right?’

‘Perhaps. But don’t count on it. Her husband’s not the man to send off a telegram for nothing.’

But he was the man, apparently, to be damnably vague about it. No address on the postcard they had sent and no hospital named in the wire. As he drove towards Margate he thought with some annoyance that it would take time to find the patient or Stick himself. There was ‘our window marked with an X’, but even this might be complicated.

The crowds had left the town but many of the fun fairs, amusement arcades, disothèques, boutiques, cafés, pornography stalls, palais de danse, freak booths, strip-tease clubs, bingo halls, bowling alleys, and other institutions necessary for the modern mass holiday were still open and there was an air of dying frivolity about the place.

Carolus drove along the front till he could see the tall building in which was ‘our window marked with an X’. It had no doors on the sea-front and driving round the back of the building he found it was nothing less than the *Grand Vista Hotel. Prop. Mrs Estelle Buckingham*. He entered and went to a counter marked *Office*. A small handbell was provided and after a few moments Carolus ventured to ring it.

The whole hallway, with its tall pseudo-Jacobean seats and copper warming-pans, seemed to hold its breath as the tintinnabulation died away.

Then a door opened and a Presence was behind the counter.

Mrs Estelle Buckingham was not tall, but she succeeded in looking impressive. Studying her off-mode splendour, Carolus felt he understood where the crowds at Torremolinos came from.

‘Yes?’ she said in a throaty non-committal voice.

‘Would you mind telling me whether you have a Mr and Mrs Stick staying here?’

‘They *were* here,’ admitted Mrs Buckingham grandly. ‘They are here no longer.’

‘Oh, dear. I’m most anxious to find them.’

‘I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.’

‘They didn’t say where ...’

‘They said nothing.’ She paused and then, as though making a great concession, added:

‘They didn’t suit.’

‘You mean they were working here?’

‘Oh, no. They were guests. But they were not Our Sort of People.’

This was the New Snobbery of the 1970’s. Carolus kept his temper.

‘I know just what you mean. I thought perhaps you might have gathered whether they are still in Margate.’

‘Cliftonville,’ corrected Mrs Buckingham. ‘I did hear it mentioned that they had been seen about the town after leaving here.’

‘Thank you so much.’

‘Are you the police?’

‘Certainly not. Why? Surely Mr and Mrs Stick...’

‘I have no reason to suppose they are wanted persons. They were simply not the type we are accustomed to. May I ask whether you are connected with them in some way?’

‘Yes. Certainly. Mrs Stick is my very dear and able house-keeper.’

‘That accounts for it.’

‘For what, for heaven’s sake?’

‘I suspected they were in service.’

‘Is there anything disgraceful about that except the anachronism of it?’

‘Nothing disgraceful. But we’re living in another age. It didn’t do. My guests don’t like the idea of private service. They are independent-minded people, mostly from Yorkshire. And I resented Mrs Stick’s criticism of my

cuisine.'

'I see.'

'Moreover, there is a public-house on the corner. The Royal Thanet. I do not care for my guests to use it. It lowers the tone of the hotel if they're seen popping across the road.'

'Why? Don't Yorkshiremen drink?'

'Dear me. You *are* behind the times! Do you still think of factory technicians as workers who swallow beer in pubs?'

'Well, I'm bound to say I should have thought ...'

'My guests prefer to take a bottle of wine at dinner. But could Mr and Mrs Stick see that? Not a bit of it. They were across there every night, sharp at opening time.'

'You're not going to tell me they came back drunk?'

'No-o. Not drunk. But the man Stick appeared to have had a few. And they were both rather noisy.'

'Noisy?' gasped Carolus.

Mrs Buckingham inclined her head.

'I have just heard that Mrs Stick has been taken to hospital,' said Carolus. 'I suppose you don't happen to know anything about that?'

'Nothing, I'm afraid.'

'Can you suggest any way of tracing them? You have been most kind.'

'There are only three hospitals it could possibly have been. I suggest you try them in turn. I will write down their names for you, with address in each case. I think you should go to them personally. The telephone is not very satisfactory in these cases. And if you find nothing, try the Royal Thanet at six o'clock.'

'I'll take your advice.'

'Of course, she may have been entered under another name.'

'Why ever would she be?'

'People do, you know.'

'I think it's most unlikely in this case.'

'But you don't even know what's wrong with her. She may have been knocked down crossing the road when she wasn't steady on her feet.'

'Mrs Stick is always steady on her feet,' said Carolus loyally. 'But thank you very much for these addresses.'

'It's a pleasure,' said Mrs Buckingham.

None of the three hospitals was able to help him. One young woman said, 'Stick! What an extraordinary name!' and wrinkled her nose; another said they had a Mr Strickland in D Ward, but by six o'clock Carolus was prepared to believe that the telegram had been a hoax to get him out of Clibburn on the day of the dance.

He did as Mrs Buckingham suggested and went to the Royal Thanet as it opened at six. He found himself alone with the barman, who wore a reddish beard and had a mean smile. His name was Dick.

Carolus asked if he knew the Sticks.

'Do I *not*!' he responded heartily.

'I gather they come here most evenings.'

'Regular as clockwork. They'll be in in a few minutes. You a friend of theirs?'

'Yes.'

'They're a pair, aren't they?'

They certainly were, but Dick implied more than this.

'In what way?'

'Got some life in them. Not like half the bees round here. You should see her when she's had one or two.'

'I never have.'

'Oh, my goodness! You've missed something. He's just as bad.'

'Really?'

'I'm telling you. They have us in fits of laughter.'

'I don't think we can be talking about the same people.'

'Yes, we are. Sticks, that's it. He looks quiet at first and she's a little old girl with glasses. You'd never believe it to look at them.'

'Believe *what*?'

'Like I'm telling you. Well, they're on holiday, so why not? That's what I say. They're not doing any harm. Ever heard her imitate a couple of cats on the roof? You'd die laughing.'

'I can't believe it!'

'You'd believe it all right if you were here round about closing time.'

Life was full of revelations, pondered Carolus.

'I hear Mrs Stick has been taken to hospital.'

'When? She was all right last night. Very much all right.'

'I had the telegram today.'

‘Then ten to one it’s a lark of theirs. They’re always up to something. She’ll be in as right as rain in a minute.’

She was, followed by Stick. They did not see Carolus at first, but went straight up to the bar.

‘Hallo, Mrs Stick!’ said Dick and at once burst out laughing.

‘Now, Dick. Don’t start!’ said Mrs Stick, smiling brightly.

‘It’s too early in the evening for that!’ said Stick.

What he was not to start, what *that* was—these were left unspecified.

‘There’s a friend waiting for you,’ said Dick and hurried away.

Mrs Stick was in no way abashed, Carolus was pleased to see.

She was still smiling when she came up to him and asked, ‘Whatever brings you here, sir?’

Carolus handed her the telegram, which she read, taking her time.

‘We know nothing about it,’ she said. ‘I’ve never been to hospital and wouldn’t go not if I was dying. Whatever does it mean?’

‘I thought it was a practical joke,’ said Carolus.

‘If it is, it has nothing to do with us. Look at this, Stick. We like a bit of a joke when we’re on holiday but neither of us would ever think of playing silly tricks like that. And you came rushing down here, sir? It’s a shame and a very nasty thing to have done.’

Stick was more practical. He knew Carolus’s drink and brought over a double with his pint and Mrs Stick’s Guinness.

‘It could be,’ Carolus was unwise enough to say, ‘that someone wanted me out of the way for a time.’

‘So there *are* goings-on where you’re staying? I knew it as soon as you told me you were off for a fortnight. What is it this time, sir? Not more murders?’

‘There may be, unless I get back. So you’re all right, Mrs Stick? I’m glad to find that.’

‘Of course I’m all right. And if I wasn’t you wouldn’t get telegrams about it, as you might have known. What I’d like to find out is how they guessed where to send it? No one knows anything about us down here.’

‘Oh, don’t they?’ put in Dick. ‘You’d be surprised.’

‘Now, Dick. You stop that.’ Mrs Stick turned to Carolus, who was preparing to leave. ‘I’m ever so sorry if it’s anyone from here,’ she said. ‘I don’t see how it can be, though.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll see you back in Newminster in about a week. You seem

to be having a good time.'

'You have to have a laugh sometimes,' said Mrs Stick. 'Else where should we be?'

'Where indeed?' asked Carolus, and saying good night to Stick and the barman went out to his car.

So he had been got away from Clibburn by a clumsy trick, clumsy and ineffective, unless the time at which his absence was necessary was the afternoon, not the evening. For it was now 6.18 and if he drove fast he would be back soon after seven, in plenty of time for the dance. Like so much else that had happened in the village, this could have serious consequences and intent or it could be trivial—like the shot at Murrain's roof, like the inverted crucifix, like Alice Murrain's reputed powers. He did not try to decide who had done it, who had sent the telegram from Margate, but he had a pretty good idea how it had come about. Margaret Lark knew about the Sticks and had seen the postcard, and either through frivolous gossip or by intent had passed the information on to someone to whom his absence was important. There were other remote possibilities, the village post-office, the postman, even John Stainer, who was well aware of Carolus's sense of obligation to the Sticks. But all the probabilities were that Margaret Lark had chattered.

Margaret's faculty for gossip cut both ways. If anything had happened during his absence she would know of it.

'Nothing—so far as I've heard,' she said when he asked her. 'There was a football match, I think.'

'Mrs Lark, do you remember my telling you about my housekeeper and her husband at Margate?'

'Mm,' she nodded. 'Why?'

'Can you remember telling anyone about that?'

'I might have menched it to Luce Smith.'

'And your husband?'

'Def no. I never tell him Clib news. Why?'

'Because someone who knew they were there took the trouble to go to Margate and send a telegram summoning me because Mrs Stick had been taken to hospital. Silly, but it worked. I've just come back after finding both the Sticks perfectly well and knowing nothing of any telegram.'

'What an extraor thing! You don't blame me, do you?'

'Not directly. But I think you must have told someone. No one else here knows about the Sticks.'

'Oh, dear. Have I opened my big mouth again? I'm terribly sorry. The only person I can remember telling was Lucy. Surely she couldn't have sent the telegram?'

'No. But she could have told someone who did.'

'You think someone wanted you out of the way? Bit silly, wasn't it, because you were bound to be back as soon as you found they were all right. I don't know who it can have been. Everyone here's busy with the dance. It's going to be quite a thing this year.'

'So I gather.'

'You'll go, of course?'

'Yes. I shall go. What about you?'

'Yes. Believe it or not, Ron's decided he wants to go. I'm going to wheel him down.'

'I hope you both enjoy it.'

'I say, Car, you don't think anything will happen, do you?'

'What do you mean?'

'It's probably silly, but Allhallowe'en's always meant rather a lot in the place. In other places it's more a joke than anything, but here they take it seriously. There's supposed to be a tradition about it. And after all the talk there has been, and after what happened last year, I can't help wondering. It seems so extraordinary Matchlow's coming and giving it out that he's coming, too. And the Murrains—what do they want to go to a dance for?'

'To dance, perhaps.'

'You're joking. I shall feel better when it's over, I can tell you.'

John Stainer was no less anxious.

'I know I mustn't expect miracles from you, Carolus, but have you got anywhere with your enquiries? The dance starts in less than an hour.'

'Don't I know it? No, I'm still very much at sea. There's a certain amount of ill-will felt for Horseman. I'm sure of that.'

'And yet no one is more popular with the younger people. He's considered With It. You'll see at the dance tonight. He's the undisputed Master of Ceremonies. A bit of a funny man, I know, but he makes it all go with a swing. Our village hall was once a Nonconformist chapel. We bought it some years ago and have never finished the alterations. The lectern is still there and Horseman announces all the dances from it.'

'Surely that doesn't endear him to any Nonconformists there may be?'

'I've never heard any complaint. He has them all in fits of laughter.'

'Dear me. It's going to be embarrassing. And fancy dress, which always makes me wilt. You're not wearing it, are you, John?'

'Well, I rather thought just a touch. Guy Fawkes, perhaps.'

'You're getting your dates mixed.'

'I happen to have the costume from another occasion. Doesn't it occur to you, Carolus, that people *like* to assume a different identity sometimes? They don't want always to be the same.'

'As long as you don't expect me ...'

'But I *do*, Carolus. I've got your costume all ready for you. You would give such offence to come without it.'

'Really, John. You expect too much. What is it?'

'Sherlock Holmes,' said John enthusiastically. 'The very thing. An Inverness cape and a deerstalker. You'll just slip it on, won't you? Be a good chap.'

'I'm not a good chap. I suppose, since you ask me, I can't help it. But you might have warned me. Tell me some more about the occasion.'

'Mavis Horseman is in charge of the eats, though she never comes to these things herself. She always does them for our functions and very good she is, though everyone contributes. Ebby Smith and his wife are in charge of the hall.'

'Of course, I'd forgotten Ebby was married.'

'Yes, a big dumb ox of a woman who works like a navvy. The hall will be beautifully clean—I can promise you that. Then there's the band. I've told you about them. The Sarawaks, they call themselves. They're very good, I'm told. I don't understand pop music myself, but I know our boys are quite famous. They've been on television. George Garries is the leader. They say he ought to be a professional. He's a trumpeter and really does the most extraordinary things with his instrument.'

'I hope he has forgiven me. The last time I saw him he threatened to blow my brains out.'

'You must have said something to upset him or his father. There's great loyalty between them. But don't take any notice of that. George is a very good-hearted fellow who would wish no one any harm. I'd like to be able to say the same for his father.'

'But you can't?'

'Not after that cross incident.'

'Of course not. I quite see.'

'It is surprising about Matchlow, of course, whatever Judith may say. Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine him at a village dance. But I think it's a welcome development.'

'Let's hope so,' said Carolus less optimistically.

'I think you'll be surprised at some of the costumes. They really do take trouble—and spend money.'

'What will Mrs Murrain wear?' asked Carolus impishly.

'Oh, she'll wear something,' said the Rector confidently.

'One hopes so.'

John laughed.

'Carolus, you're cruel.'

'Boadicea, perhaps. Or Queen Elizabeth.'

'Something regal, I've no doubt. She has never been before, so I haven't much idea. But it's good of you to come, old Carolus. I feel when we've got over this we shall be halfway home to peace and quiet in the village.'

Once again Carolus sounded less sanguine.

'I do hope so, John. What time does it start?'

'Eight o'clock. I must rush upstairs and change. It ends on the dot of twelve. But you don't need to turn up till nine o'clock or so. I always go early to look after things in the early stages, and generally leave just before the end.'

'I'll be there before nine,' promised Carolus.

Nine

In spite of John Stainer's suggestion that he should not arrive at the dance before nine, Carolus decided to go along earlier. He had not yet seen the Wincott Hall and he wanted to look round it, then to watch arrivals.

He found it out a hundred yards or so on a road leading out of the village to unlit country. There was very little street lighting in Clibburn, one standard in the centre doing duty for all, though the White Horse had lights over the door. The hall stood alone, a rather gloomy building, whose origins as a Nonconformist chapel were plain to see. Long narrow windows down both sides of it were illumined, but the light in them was pale and unwelcoming.

There was a light over the door, however, so that arrivals for the dance were lit for a moment as they entered—somewhat eerily, Carolus thought. The costumes they had chosen were not gay, brightly coloured ones, but seemed to represent rather gloomy subjects, so there was something a little macabre about seeing monks, executioners, witches, judges, pirates, highwaymen, characters from Dickens and the rest as they stepped into the circle of light, then entered.

Carolus walked round the outside of the hall and found that there was an office or vestry at the far end with an entrance of its own, but no other way in except by the main doors. He noticed that over these was a gallery reached by an inside staircase—formerly an organ loft perhaps.

He returned to a point near the entrance from which he could watch without being noticed. He saw the Murrains arrive on foot dressed as Puritans. She entered with assumed dignity and he drifted in behind her. There had been speculation as to whether the Gunnings would come, but they did so, Gunning appropriately as the village blacksmith and Cicely looking quite at ease as a milkmaid.

He became aware that he himself was being watched by a policeman in uniform who was leaning on his bicycle in the road by the entrance. Rutters, he supposed, correctly as he found later. Presently Rutters came across to him. He was a big man with a somewhat self-important manner.

'Sherlock Holmes, eh?' He sounded both patronising and hostile. 'What are you hanging about here for?'

'I might ask the same question,' said Carolus cheerfully.

‘You might. And I might say it was none of your bloody business. Whereas it *is* mine, when you stand about in the shadow looking at people arriving.’

‘Why?’ asked Carolus.

‘Never you mind why. Are you going in to this dance?’

‘Presently.’

‘Well, make up your mind.’

Carolus regretted the days when the village policeman was *called* the village policeman and not either ‘police officer’ or ‘bastard’ according to who was speaking. When he was a friend to the community, keeping down rustic crime at his own discretion and knowing the folk who depended on him for the maintenance of law and order. This new, arrogant type, backed by arbitrary authority, was a pain in the neck.

He also decided that Rutters was a bit of a bully, and like most bullies unsure of himself. He could probably deflate him with a few sharp words, the names of his superior officers and a hectoring manner of his own. But it wasn’t worth while. The man, after all, had a dreary job and the character of Sherlock Holmes, in which Carolus remembered he appeared, could scarcely be a favourite one with the modern police force. He did not move from his place or make any further answer and after a moment, as he anticipated, Rutters moved away.

Just then Drummer Sloman arrived dressed in the full regalia of a cowboy. He and Rutters were evidently old enemies.

‘Now, young Drummer, you behave yourself tonight. I don’t want any trouble with you.’

‘That’s okay, Sheriff,’ said Drummer good-humouredly. ‘You can call off your posse for tonight.’

‘Want to be funny, eh,’ said Rutters angrily.

‘Oh, come on, Charlie,’ Drummer said to his brother. Charlie followed him, dressed as a devil. ‘Let the Sheriff cool off.’

They went into the hall, from which could be heard the microphone-magnified voice of Horseman. ‘Take your partners for ...’ A roar of laughter drowned the rest. But the laughter was good-humoured. Horseman was evidently a popular character here.

Margaret Lark, a somewhat skinny Scheherazade, wheeled in her husband who was not in costume, William Garries in sombrero and cloak, Ebby Smith and his daughter, neither of them in costume, had already gone in, and Carolus was wondering about Xavier Matchlow when he arrived in a

car driven by his wife. He wore his plum-coloured velvet smoking-jacket with a black tie and patent-leather shoes, and with his thick long silver hair looked picturesque enough to dispense with further costume. Judith looked charming as an Edwardian with a harem skirt and a large hat.

Carolus decided to enter. He nodded to Rutters as though they were old friends and went into the lighted hall.

The atmosphere here was entirely unexpected. The older people congregated round the bar in apparently friendly and cheerful conversation and the younger ones entirely dominated the proceedings. The members of the band were youngsters and would have appeared to dancers of a previous generation to be a collection of lunatics, and the dancers jerked their heads, waved their arms, waggled their bottoms, swayed and twisted and gesticulated, unrestrained by propriety or any sense of dignity. They sought the ridiculous, the grotesque, the uninhibited.

It could not be said that they looked happy. They were intent on doing their thing and proceeded with a semi-idiot purposefulness with their strange gyrations, but did not watch one another or expect to be watched. There was no laughter among them and only occasional smiles.

Carolus saw Horseman, jerking and circling with the rest. He was dressed as a sailor and the inappropriate uniform made him look bulky and older than his age. When he got up to announce the next dance he did so, as John had predicted, from the lectern left there from the time when the hall had been a chapel. It stood to the left, but a little in the rear of the band, and when Horseman had spoken he gave a peremptory tap on the lectern with a baton as though conducting. The band played up to this by turning to him and pretending to take their time from him. Although this piece of foolery was repeated with every dance it seemed to please Horseman's audience. It was evident that he was regarded as a funny man with a joke for every announcement and roused laughter and cheers. It made Carolus feel uncomfortable.

Carolus joined the group at the bar.

'I thought young people nowadays had more discernment,' Alice Murrain was saying. 'How they can stand that bloated idiot making a fool of himself I shall never know.'

Carolus looked at Alice in her Puritan dress and wondered which was more ridiculous, Horseman with the favour he curried from youth, or Alice with her occult pretensions. He felt mischievous.

'Couldn't you do something about him?' he whispered. 'Strike him dumb, or something? Just temporarily, of course.'

At first Alice looked as though she would have preferred to use her powers on Carolus, but she gained control of herself and turned away.

‘I had a nice run down to Margate today,’ Carolus observed chattily.

Alice Murrain did not answer, and not very long afterwards she and her husband left the hall, apparently in disgust.

Carolus saw that in the group round the bar was a face he had never consciously seen. He had not noticed him entering the hall or at any other time, and decided that this was not strange as he was one of those men who are by nature unnoticeable. Hair and eyes of no particular colour, insignificant features, characterless clothes, he spoke little and in an undistinguished voice. Just now he was talking to Ronald Lark, but neither seemed much interested in their conversation.

Carolus saw Judith across the hall. She had been dancing with one of the young men and looked flushed and vivid in contrast with the stranger.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘who is that talking to Ronald Lark?’

‘Where? Oh, yes. That’s Poley Grant. I told you about him. Some kind of journalist.’

Carolus started to make his way back to the group, but when he reached it the man had left. He did not see him again.

He approached Ronald Lark.

‘Were you talking to a man named Poley Grant?’

‘Was I? I didn’t notice,’ Lark said and Carolus could well believe him.

The evening wore on to the inevitable denouement of midnight. There was no rowdiness, and only one brief scene between Margaret Lark and Cicely Gunning in which they raised accusing voices and became the centre of attention—though no one seemed able to discover the cause. Their repective husbands were together near the bar at the time and pointedly had a drink together as though to dissociate themselves from their wives’ tantrums. Then Horseman announced another dance and all went on as before.

But it was, thought Carolus, a very odd scene, one of the oddest in his memory. The people themselves were odd, the place and the occasion, and there was undoubtedly, in his own mind at least, a sense of tension. He could not have defined it more accurately than a belief that something was going to happen. Absurd, he told himself. He was being caught up in this village hocus-pocus, and yet he felt that the evening would not end in a commonplace scattering to their homes of such a disparate gathering brought together by such unguessable motives.

There was a tradition in Clibburn, perhaps going back to the time when church and chapel both had been treated with more consideration, that dances of Saturday nights should end before midnight to satisfy the most watchful sabbatarians. This tradition was still respected, and shortly before twelve o'clock Horseman stood behind his lectern and moved his mouth close to the microphone. The last waltz was finished, John Stainer had left the hall, the room was quiet, and the band stood with their instruments poised ready to play the National Anthem.

'We come,' said Horseman, 'to the witching hour of midnight At the first stroke of the church clock our revels now are ended and the band will play *God Save the Queen*.' He held his baton in readiness.

Everyone waited for the sound of the chime, but instead came another, the explosion of a number of fire-crackers, which went off in front of the hall. Charlie Sloman was having his practical joke and filled the hall with a nauseating smell and caused shrieks and dismay among the closely packed people there. What was more, it continued for several moments and the stroke of the church clock was inaudible.

Horseman, seeming a little put out by this disturbance of his act, tapped irritably for the band.

Carolus was standing quite near Horseman and watching him closely. What he actually saw was straightforward tragedy—Horseman falling behind the lectern and collapsing sideways to the ground. But he was aware of more than that. He was not conscious of *hearing* a shot or seeing anything beyond the collapse, yet he knew that a shot had been fired. Horseman had been shot through the heart, and death must have been instantaneous for no sound came from the prone figure.

The fire-crackers continued to explode, and at first those who had actually been watching Horseman realised what had happened. The pistol shot had been indistinguishable among the noise of the fire-crackers. But after a very quick examination of the dead man, Carolus acted with decision. He left those near to gather round Horseman's body and hurried out to Rutters.

'A man's been shot,' he said. 'Keep everybody in at this door and I'll go round the back and hold the others.'

The policeman was so surprised that he obeyed.

'No one may leave,' he said importantly to the first who tried to make a bolt for it. Then, gaining confidence, he said, 'Keep calm. Just sit down, please. No one may leave the hall till the police officers arrive. Dr Richards, will you look after the wounded man?'

Carolus ran round to the back and was just in time to find Albert Gunning coming through the door, followed by Cicely.

‘I’m sorry,’ Carolus said. ‘I’ve been asked by the police to prevent anyone leaving.’

Albert, no longer the calm and civil man whom Carolus had known, shouted, ‘Who the hell are you? My wife’s got to have some fresh air. Get out of the way!’

It could have been a very unpleasant scene. Gunning was roused to fury. But Cicely said, ‘Albert! Albert, don’t!’

Carolus suggested that Mrs Gunning should sit in the doorway in the fresh air.

‘I’m sorry, Albert,’ he said. ‘But the police are right, you know. Horseman is dead.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Lark, who had joined them. ‘I heard Dr Richards say he’d been shot through the heart.’

‘You can see that the police must prevent everyone from leaving.’

Albert was calmer.

‘I suppose so, if there’s been a murder.’

‘Look here, Albert. Will you hold on here for a while? I must go round and let Rutters phone the station. You won’t let anyone out, will you?’

‘All right. No one’ll go till the police come.’

Carolus went back to Rutters.

‘I can hold them if you want to phone the station,’ he said.

‘I don’t know what to do. I must get ‘em here straight away, but I oughtn’t to leave this job to anyone else.’

‘You can’t do two things at once. You can trust me, you know.’

Rutters went and Carolus took over his position. Most people in the hall had settled down. The doctor remained by the bulky figure of the dead man, looking grotesque in its unsuitable sailor’s uniform. There was a hum and mutter of conversation in the room.

Rutters returned from the phone.

‘The police van will be here in ten minutes,’ he announced to those round the door. Then to Carolus, ‘The sergeant’s coming. I shall be glad to hand this lot over to him, I can tell you. Had any trouble?’

‘None at all,’ said Carolus, and as he spoke he thought what an extraordinary thing it was that none of those in the hall had demanded to be released. He would have thought the teenagers, notoriously rebellious,

would have made a rush for it. But even more, he would have supposed that William Garries, who had already shown his hostility to Carolus, or Xavier Matchlow, who wasn't a man to accept authority, would have asked him his business there and tried to leave. He remembered this strange acquiescence later.

Carolus returned to Albert Gunning.

'All quiet?' he asked.

'Yes. One or two of the young ones had a try to get out, but I soon settled that.'

'Good. Won't be long now.'

'I hope you don't think there was anything funny about me making for this door when it happened. Only, see, the wife gets very upset with anything like that and I thought I'd better get her out to the air.'

'I quite understand.'

'I hope you do. I shouldn't like you to think I had anything to hide.'

'That's all right, Albert.'

'Because it's known that I never cared for Horseman and half blamed him over Cyril...'

'I didn't think anything like that. I simply co-operated with the police in keeping everyone in.'

Albert did not seem satisfied.

'As long as you feel like that about it,' he said doubtfully.

'Albert wouldn't hurt a fly,' put in Cicely.

Carolus had said all he could and left the Gunnings. He made his way across to the group at the bar.

Matchlow, looking very calm and still elegant, said, 'How much longer are we to be kept here?'

'Don't ask me,' said Carolus. 'It's a police affair.'

'You seem to be in their confidence.'

'Not at all. Rutters has phoned for some senior officers.'

'That's good. They may have some sense. Do you suppose they'll want to search us?'

'I have no idea. I should, in their place, but I'm not a policeman.'

'That fellow Horseman has caused nothing but trouble ever since he came here.'

'He won't cause any more,' said Carolus drily.

He left the group and went back to Rutters.

‘What about Horseman’s wife?’ he said. ‘Oughtn’t she to be told?’

The policeman no longer resented Carolus, who had helped him in a tricky situation and did not want any credit for it.

‘I suppose she did,’ he said, with one of those breaches of syntax which particularly delighted Carolus. ‘Tell you what,’ he added after a moment’s thought. ‘I’ll leave that to the sergeant. He should be here at any minute. He’ll send someone to tell her, and I hope it won’t be me. Not the sort of job I go for.’

‘Just a sergeant coming?’

‘I don’t know. I made my report to the station. I shouldn’t be surprised if he picks up the CID on the way. After all, it looks like murder.’

‘It is murder. What else could it be? And a very well-planned murder, too.’

Lights were visible in the lane, and in a few seconds a police car stopped. A sergeant in uniform and two plain-clothes men alighted and crossed to Rutters. Carolus drifted inconspicuously away.

Ten

The police were competent and courteous. The ladies were asked to show the contents of their bags to a policewoman and allowed to leave when they had given their names and addresses to one of the plain-clothes men. The men also gave their names, and after asking the permission of each—in no case refused—one of the CID men quickly frisked them. They, too, were released.

But when Drummer Sloman swaggered up to the officers there was some excitement because a pistol was still in his holster.

‘What’s this?’

‘A .38 revolver,’ replied Drummer.

‘Is it your own property?’

‘No.’

‘Where did you get it?’

‘A friend lent it to me. For the dance.’

‘For the dance?’

‘Yeah. Can’t you see this is a Western outfit I’m wearing?’

‘What friend? What’s his name?’

‘I’m not saying.’

One of the policemen examined the weapon. It was unloaded.

‘A shot has recently been fired from one chamber of this revolver.’

‘Go on!’ said Drummer cheerfully.

‘Did you fire that shot?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

There was a long tense pause.

‘You’ll come with us for questioning,’ said the policeman.

‘Okay,’ said Drummer, who did not appear to take the matter seriously.

‘And your younger brother.’

‘You might let my mum know then. She’ll be waiting up.’

Many versions of this incident were carried away by those dispersing and in a short time went through the village. Drummer Sloman had fired the shot which had killed Horseman and had been charged with murder,

Drummer Sloman had been taken away for questioning, Drummer Sloman had supplied the revolver with which Horseman was killed, and so on.

Carolus went up to the sergeant. He had removed his cape and deerstalker.

‘I think I should tell you that I was standing beside that young man when the shot was fired,’ he said.

‘And?’

‘He didn’t fire it.’

‘Who are you?’

‘My name is Deene. I’m staying in the village.’

‘Very well, Mr Deene. Let me have your name and address. If we need your testimony we will call on you.’

He continued with the remainder of the public. No other revolver was found on any of them. The members of the band were advised to take their instruments with them as the hall would be locked up for some time while it was under examination. Carolus watched them as they carried out their drums and saxophones. They were in a hurry to escape and their leader had not waited to put his instrument in its case, but carried both. Ebby Smith looked about him in a rather baffled way—he took his responsibilities seriously and perhaps wondered when he would be able to clear up the mess in the hall.

When everyone was out of the hall except the two CID men the doors were closed. Carolus guessed that they were waiting for the experts and photographers before removing the body, and in the meantime would search everywhere in the hall for another weapon.

He decided not to wait until the unfortunate experts had been summoned from their beds, for he would of course be excluded from the examination of the corpse, which remained untouched, and he was likely to learn nothing at all of their conclusions until the inquest.

At the rectory he found John Stainer and Ron and Margaret Lark together round a fire.

‘I’ve brought Mrs Horseman back here,’ Margaret Lark said, in the solemnity of the occasion indulging in no abbreviations. ‘Dr Richards gave her a couple of pastilles and she’s sleeping quite peacefully. It was, of course, a terrible shock.’

‘It is for everyone,’ said John.

No one suggested by the least word or sign that Carolus was in any way to blame, yet he felt that among them was some doubt as to whether he

could not have prevented the tragedy.

‘It was a shock to me too,’ he said.

‘I suppose we should have had some inkling after that shot in the lane the other night,’ said John Stainer.

‘On the contrary, that gave me a certain security—false as it turned out. I can only say that there must have been a motive far stronger than I dreamed of. I assumed a motive and it was not the right one.’

‘But do you know who shot Horseman?’ said Ron Lark impatiently.

‘No, I don’t. I shall find out, but what’s the use of that now?’ ‘Exactly.’

‘Have the police asked Mavis Horseman any questions yet?’

‘No. They’re coming at eleven tomorrow morning. She wasn’t in a state to be questioned tonight.’

‘Of course not.’

‘But they’ve arrested the Sloman brothers?’

‘Taken them in for questioning.’

‘Carolus,’ said John Stainer seriously. ‘You accused Connor Horseman of not telling us all he knew the other night. Do you still think he was to blame for that?’

‘Very much.’

‘You mean that if had confided in you, or in the police, his life might have been saved?’

‘Probably, yes.’

‘It’s a wretched business. *Why* was he withholding information?’

Carolus decided to suppose this was a rhetorical question and went up to bed.

He came down early and, finding Margaret Lark, asked if she thought Mrs Horseman would see him.

‘Well, I don’t know. She was very upset last night.’

‘Tell her I’m trying to find out who killed her husband.’

‘I don’t think that will cut much ice. It’s my imp that they were scarcely on speaking terms. She was upset, yes; well, anyone would be, wouldn’t they? But I wouldn’t describe her as heartbroken. If you want to know what I think, I think she was putting on an act last night. Still, I’m going to take her up some breck and I’ll ask her.’

Ten minutes later Margaret Lark said, ‘She’ll see you. She’s coming down very soon.’

Mavis Horseman, when she appeared, seemed to Carolus an unlikely kind of woman to meet in these circumstances. The wife of the biographer of Mathew Hopkins, the widow of a man who had died violently, a woman who had lived in this outlandish village surrounded by intrigue, occultism and malice, should not, he thought, have quite such a commonplace, such a thoroughly conventional, appearance. With her dyed auburn hair and tight uncharitable-looking mouth, her rimless spectacles and business-like manner, she belonged to the world of supermarkets and bingo halls, of morning coffee and nightly television. She seemed to expect that some pretence of tragedy was expected of her, but Carolus felt it *was* a pretence.

‘I hear you want to ask me some questions. I don’t know if I’m doing right in talking to you before I see the police.’

Carolus realised that ‘I don’t know if I’m doing right’ was a catch-phrase, and a favourite one. He therefore started without hesitation.

‘Did you know much of your husband’s interest in the occult?’

‘Nothing at all. He never discussed it with me.’

‘But you had read his book?’

‘I tried to. It seemed the proper thing to do. But I couldn’t get on with it. I like something lighter, myself.’

‘You were aware of what was going on in Clibburn?’

‘I never took that amount of notice. When Connor came to live here he did not tell me anything much of the place till we’d moved in, and I had to find out for myself all about this witchcraft. Connor and I didn’t discuss that sort of thing.’

‘Did he get on with the people here? The older people, I mean. I know he was popular with the younger crowd.’

‘No. He didn’t. He was cold-shouldered from the first. Whether they didn’t like his book or didn’t like him, I don’t know. But the Matchlows and the Murrains and that lot would have nothing to do with him, which made it very awkward for me. I expected Judith Matchlow to call and she didn’t. I got to know her later through the W.I., but we were never what you’d call friends.’

‘But there was no open difference between your husband and Matchlow?’

‘Not till the big row—almost a year ago.’

‘You knew about that?’

‘Only what everyone else knew. Connor never went into it. It appeared he went to call on Matchlow to complain about something and they had a

regular set-to. All the village knew about it, though no one seemed to know the exact reason. I didn't like it. It made it so awkward for me. Besides, you never know with people like that.'

'Never know what?'

'Well, I mean. They're supposed to have powers. Look what's happened now.'

'You think your husband's death may have been brought about by witchcraft?'

'I don't know about that, but it's very strange, isn't it? You see, I know there was something they wanted from Connor. Some *object* he possessed.'

'What made you think that?'

'You come to know these things—living with a man. However secretive he may be. Scraps of telephone conversation. Things he does and says.'

'Some information perhaps?'

'No. It was an object.'

'You mean a talisman? A fetish? Some kind of relic?'

'I don't know what it was, but I know it was something they were trying to get hold of. I asked my husband about it one day and he as good as admitted it. "But they won't get it," he said.'

'Could it have been the book he was writing?'

'No. I don't think so. Though, mind you, he always locked up all his papers when he wasn't working.'

'He hadn't a safe?'

'No. But a very heavy oak cupboard.'

'And you suggest that it was in order to get possession of this *thing*, whatever it was, that they murdered your husband?'

Carolus used 'thing' as she did, giving it the vaguest connotation.

'Oh, no. I can't imagine anyone here murdering. They are spiteful people, suspicious and peculiar, but you couldn't think of them as murderers. I wouldn't say that for a minute. If it wasn't an accident last night it must have been some stranger in the hall.'

'It could scarcely have been an accident, Mrs Horseman. It was carefully planned, whoever did it.'

'You see, I know so little about Connor's affairs. And what little I know I had to find out for myself. There was a funny thing happened with Gerald Murrain once. Connor had been working on his book all the morning and in the afternoon, about tea-time, I was out. Here, as a matter of fact. I've

always been friendly with Margaret Lark. Ebby Smith was in the garden. He used to give us a day a week. He's got green fingers, you know, whatever else he is. Connor got rid of him after that day, but I missed his help. However, I was telling you, at about four o'clock Ebby came and tapped on the study windows.

'Connor was annoyed because he hated being disturbed while he was working, but Ebby beckoned him out and he went, leaving his books open on the table and the page he was writing on the blotter. Ebby persuaded him to walk right down the garden, then kept him arguing about some plants Connor had bought. When Connor got back to his study Gerald Murrain was sitting there.

'Connor was furious and asked what he was doing there. Gerald said good afternoon in his ingratiating way, then calmly told him he wanted to see Connor for a moment, and had been shown into this room. "Who showed you in here?" shouted Connor, because he knew the house was empty. Gerald said it was a woman. Connor asked if he meant me, and Gerald said, no, another woman. An old one, with a stick.

'I don't know whether you know,' continued Mavis, 'that there's a story about our house. Thumpings are supposed to be heard made by an old woman with a stick. Connor almost went for Gerald Murrain. He told him to get out and never come back. Gerald kept saying that he only wanted to consult Connor for a moment, but Connor shouted, *Get Out!* At last Gerald walked out. After that relations with the Murrains, too, were strained.'

'Yes. I see. And you only learned of that by hearsay? Your husband never told you of it?'

'In that case he did mention something, almost as though it were a joke, about finding Gerald creeping round the house and throwing him out. But I never cared for Alice Murrain so this time it didn't matter so much. There's something very creepy about her I think. Don't you?'

'Toads, perhaps,' said Carolus absently. 'What else did you pick up of your husband's affairs, Mrs Horseman?'

'Nothing, really. I've told you he kept them to himself. Oh, there was one other thing. I don't know if I'm doing right in telling you, and it may have nothing to do with what you want to know, but *I* thought it was funny.

'It was just after he'd had that row with Matchlow. He was out all day till about six o'clock. I don't know where he went—sometimes it was to the library at Maidstone to look at old books on Kent. But he never said anything to me. We were having something to eat in the dining-room when he seemed to suddenly remember something. He jumped up, said he

wouldn't be a minute, and went through to the study. I thought he was going to make a phone call, but he was back almost at once, putting his fountain-pen away. He went upstairs later—we have no downstairs loo—and it gave me a chance to nip in the study and see what he had written down. It didn't take much finding; it was on his jotter. All I could see was three figures—6,66 with a comma after the first six.'

'You're sure about the comma? Aleister Crowley called himself the Beast 666.'

'There was a comma there all right. I wrote it down myself later, because I thought it looked peculiar.'

Carolus felt he had pressed Mavis rather hard with questions, but she seemed quite unmoved.

'I've just two more questions I want to ask you,' he said. 'I hope I'm not tiring you?'

'Oh, no. It's only right if you're going to find out about the whole thing. I'll tell you what I can.'

'You know that Drummer Sloman has been taken away for questioning?'

'Yes, but I don't believe he did it. Do you?'

'I certainly don't think he fired the fatal shot in the hall last night,' said Carolus evasively.

'Connor was friendly with him. They used to go ferreting together.'

'A ghastly sport. If you can call it a sport.'

'I don't know anything about that. More than once Connor brought the young man back to tea. He was always very civil and well-behaved. But just lately they didn't seem to get on so well.'

'Thank you. And the last thing. Did your husband ever mention the Beacon?'

'Not to me. But he knew about it. He used to leave his books open on the arm of a chair. I saw one, *Archaeologia Cantiana*, laid open at the page about the Beacon. I don't know if I did right in looking to see what he'd been reading, but it was that.'

'You've been most helpful, Mrs Horseman.'

Mavis seemed to think that a more solemn manner was called for.

'I wish I could have told you more. It's a terrible thing when anyone's shot like that.'

'Yes.'

'Right through the heart, they said. I'm glad I wasn't there to see it. And

there'll be an inquest, of course. I shall have to go to that. I've got a black dress that could be altered. From the time my first husband died.'

'I did not know you'd been married before, Mrs Horseman.'

'Oh, yes. My first husband was an auctioneer.'

She sounded as though nothing, no memory or present event, could ruffle her.

But something did. Margaret Lark came into the room looking startled.

'I've just heard something,' she said to Mavis. 'I hope it won't upset you.'

Carolus wondered if anything could.

'Well?' asked Mavis.

'Your house was broken into last night.'

'Mean to say the police didn't leave a guard on it?' asked Carolus.

'Evidently not. I hear it has been ransacked.'

The effect on Mavis surprised them both.

'Oh, no !' she cried and raised the back of her hand to her mouth. 'My mink ! I only bought it last week!'

'From what I'm told,' said Margaret, who seemed equally lacking in a sense of proportion, 'it was chiefly in the study. All your husband's papers have gone.'

'I suppose we were insured,' said Mavis. 'But they never give you the same. And I shall need it this winter—I feel the cold terribly. You'd have thought the police ... I mean, when Connor had just been shot and I had to sleep somewhere else, they should have thought of it. It's too bad. I shall claim for every single thing. I had better go round there at once.'

'I expect the police will go round with you to see what's missing. They should be here in a minute. Hadn't you better wait till they come?'

'Perhaps I had. But I want to know about my mink. Couldn't you telephone, Mr Deene?'

'I suppose so,' said Carolus rather grudgingly.

He left the two women, and when he came back a few minutes later looked serious.

'It appears that your husband's desk has been rifled and *all* his papers taken. A mink coat is lying on the bed upstairs.'

'Thank God,' said Mavis.

'Your husband's book may have meant years of hard work.'

'I suppose so. I'm very sorry, of course. Out on the bed? That shows they

meant to take it. Perhaps they were frightened at the last minute. I hope they haven't handled it. I can't wait to go round and examine it. Would the insurance company pay for cleaning? They ought to, when it's a burglary. And what about my pearls?

A bell rang.

'That must be the police,' said Margaret Lark and hurried from the room.

Eleven

One of the plain-clothes men who had come to the hall last night had brought another older man this morning. Carolus knew neither, but concluded that this was the CID inspector handling the case. The day was gone, he reflected, when a spectacular murder of this kind merited a Superintendent—crime had become too widespread for such specialisation.

They took Mavis into the Rector's study and closed the door. Meanwhile Carolus asked Margaret Lark how she knew about the burglary at Horseman's.

'Billy Trotter,' she said. 'He takes the milk round. He's in the kitchen now if you want to see him. He discov'd the burg.'

'I'll go out to him if I may.'

He found Billy Trotter to be an urban-looking young man with long curly hair, a small beard and a pipe. Carolus introduced himself and Trotter said, 'Oh, yes,' in a knowing manner.

'I gather you were the first on the scene?' Carolus said.

'So far as I know. It was about seven o'clock. You've never seen such a bloody mess in your life.'

'Bloody?' Carolus asked, but the word had only been used for emphasis.

'The empty milk bottle was out on the step—I suppose Mavis had put it out before she knew about her husband. I had actually changed the bottles before I realised that anything was wrong. Then I noticed one of the study windows was open. They have latticed windows—it's one of those

"quaint old" houses built about thirty years ago. This window was swinging loose. That's funny, I thought.

'It had rained in the night, but you could still see the footprints, all slushed over, in the flower-bed outside the window, though you couldn't tell much more than that they were a man's. I didn't think there was anyone in the house, but I spent about five minutes ringing the bell in case there was.'

'What made you think there was no one there? Mrs Horseman might have been.'

'I was at the dance last night,' said Trotter. 'I'm in the band. Play the drums, as a matter of fact. We were all hanging about the place after it happened last night. I had heard Mavis had been taken to the rectory.'

Anyway, no one answered the bell so I decided to have a look.'

'Rather a risky procedure. You might have been suspected of the burglary.'

'That's what the coppers said when I reported it. They said I had no business to climb in the study window. But I'd seen enough from outside to know the place had been turned over and how was I to know that whoever had done it wasn't still there?'

'I see your point, but I agree with the police. However, you climbed in.'

'The whole room was littered, but no written stuff. Stationery, old newspaper cuttings, odds and ends emptied out of drawers, books pulled from shelves as if to see what was behind them, but not a scrap of manuscript.'

'Or typescript.'

'I don't think Horseman used a typewriter. There wasn't one there, anyway. But there was more than just searching among papers. Chair-covers had been ripped, carpets pulled up to see if there was any sign of the parquet being disturbed. A proper search job. Tell you what I thought. I thought the coppers themselves had been there looking for something. They didn't seem to have missed a single hiding-place.'

'The rest of the house was much the same only not so thorough, of course. There couldn't have been time in the night to look everywhere, even if there were half a dozen searching. But cupboards and drawers and places like that had been gone over.'

'What about breakages?'

'Oh, God, yes! Drawers had been forced open and cupboards broken into. It looked as though they'd used a crowbar or something like that. The police will know.'

'Of course, you've no idea what was taken away?'

'Except that a car had been backed up to the front door. Or it looked like that. There were tyre marks there, nearly washed out by the rain, but I could still see them. So there must have been enough stuff to have made it worth while to bring the car close. I read a bit of crime fiction and take an interest in anything of that sort.'

'You think there were more than one of them?'

'That's only a guess. Only one got in the window, but he could have opened the front door for others. I don't see how one man could have done the lot. He can't have had more than four hours before it began to get light.'

'And do you think they found what they wanted?'

'I've thought about that. If it was just written papers they were after you'd have said they had them, from the state of the study. Then why didn't they hop off quick? If they'd got what they wanted, why look upstairs? They even turned out Mavis's cupboards and that. I think there was two things—Horseman's papers and something else. Something valuable, perhaps. They got the papers all right, but I don't know about the other.'

'How do you *feel* about it, Trotter? You were in that house soon after the intruders. You might have a sort of instinct about them.'

'Here, you're not one of these black magic merchants, are you? No, I can see you're not, and I think I understand what you mean by instinct. I had a funny feeling in that house, as though someone was watching me. It may have been, as you say, because the thieves hadn't long gone when I got there. I should say they'd had to hurry at the last. There was a bit of a look of panic about those rooms. I don't know if you understand what I mean?'

'I do. Exactly. What you've said is very helpful. One other thing. You didn't see anyone about the village after you'd left there, did you?'

'Couple of chaps coming back from night work, but I see them every morning. I saw Bert Gunning, but he's always up at that time. I didn't see Rutters, if that's what you mean. He was fast asleep after the exertions of last night. It took his wife half an hour to get him down to hear my report about Horseman's. No, there was no one unusual about the village.'

'You didn't notice any cars?'

'Not one. No one stirs much, early Sunday morning. Not till about nine, when old Fred Dixon brings the Sunday papers in. I bet this will make headlines next week.'

'I doubt it.'

'Not with all this black magic lark?'

'That's pretty corny now.'

'So it may be. But if you can see how a man could have been shot in front of a whole crowd of people, with no one seeing anyone use a weapon...'

'We don't know that no one saw the weapon used. From what I know of Clibburn people they could be very close about it if it suited them. Surely you don't think there was anything supernatural about the murder, do you?'

'It's not what I think. It's what's being said. I've already heard talk of a bolt from the blue. I'm not saying I go for any of that stuff. But people hereabouts...'

'I'm rather tired of hearing about people hereabouts. Murder's murder

wherever its committed and however it's done. Horseman was shot through the heart. The experts will soon know from what sort of gun and the exact direction from which the bullet came. There's nothing supernatural about a bullet.'

'Of course not. Don't think I believe any of that.'

'No. No. And thanks for telling me about your discovery.'

'That's all right. Tell you what. I shall be in the White Horse presently. Generally look in there Sunday lunch-time, if you'd care to drop in. You'll hear a bit more about it then.'

Carolus thanked him for the invitation, but decided to wait to hear what Mavis Horseman had to say after her interview with the police.

Plenty, he discovered.

'Really, I don't know!' she began indignantly. 'You'd think the police had no interest at all in protecting property. They questioned me again and again about Connor, who were his friends and enemies, what he was writing, even what time he went to bed and got up, most of which I could tell them nothing about, and when I asked them why no precautions were taken to protect the house last night they simply could not answer. When I said, did they realise my mink coat had cost over a thousand pounds and wasn't even entered yet as a special item on the insurance policy, they said it was there and "in good condition", and went on to ask about Connor's manuscripts, which I know nothing about.'

'Have you been round to the house, Mrs Horseman?'

'Yes. They drove me round. Thank heaven it's all right. It had been thrown rather carelessly on a bed but it didn't seem to be damaged. And my pearls were still there, by a miracle.'

'What about your husband's papers?'

'I couldn't tell them anything about them, except that some seemed to have gone. The cupboard in which he locked them had been broken open. They didn't get my bangle, though. It wasn't of any very great value but I had a dress to go with it. I'd had it quite a long time—I believe my first husband gave it to me. I found it turned out of the drawer where I always keep it. In fact, as I told the police, nothing of any real importance has disappeared, but they kept on about those papers.'

'Did you tell them what you told me, about your suspicion that your husband had some object that someone was trying to take away from him?'

'I did, but they had no time for that. It might have been a magic crystal for all they cared. How much of Connor's book had he written? Was there

any typewritten copy of it? Did he keep it locked up? These were the things they wanted to know. I nearly screamed at one point. "Do you realise," I said, "that these burglars might have taken *all* my clothes and left me not a *stitch* to wear?"

'What did they say to that?'

'I should still have had what I was wearing yesterday evening, one of them told me, and went on about whether my husband had a revolver and whether he seemed afraid of anyone.'

'No sense of proportion, in fact?' suggested Carolus, suppressing a smile.

'Oh, none. When I told them the house ought to be guarded day and night they said, if I wasn't going to move back, I had better hire a caretaker. They had no more interest. I asked them what about my mink coat, and they said that was my responsibility. They had learned all they could from the house. I think it's absolutely disgraceful. The callousness of the police is beyond belief.'

'They are trying to find out who killed your husband.'

'Then why ask me whether he had a revolver? What has that to do with it?'

'Had he?' asked Carolus mildly.

'Of course he had. I didn't tell them that because it would only have started them on a lot more questions.'

'That was really very wrong of you, Mrs Horseman. You can't expect the police to discover things if you are not frank with them. What kind of a revolver was it?'

'I don't know what kind, but he had it in the Army.'

'Probably a .38. Any ammunition?'

'Oh, I expect so. Wouldn't there be?'

'Did he carry it on him?'

'Just lately he did. Since he was shot at.'

'You don't mean he had it on him last night?'

'More than likely. It wasn't in the drawer where he usually kept it. I happened to notice after he had left for the hall. He probably slipped it in his greatcoat pocket.'

'You really must report this to the police at once, Mrs Horseman. It is of the greatest importance.'

'I can't see why. *He* didn't shoot anyone.'

‘But he may have left it in his coat in the cloakroom. It may be the revolver used to shoot him.’

‘I shouldn’t think so. But if you insist I’ll phone them up after lunch. I’ll say I forgot about it when they asked me.’

‘I think you would be well advised to do so. They may know already.’

‘How?’

‘They may have found the revolver in his overcoat.’

She seemed quite undisturbed by the incident.

‘I shan’t move back to the house. I don’t like the thought of it after it has been broken into. I shall take my things and go and stay with friends.’

‘I wonder if I might have your address? In case I need to get in touch with you again.’

‘Certainly. C/o Mrs Milbanke, Mornington, Mermaid Lane, Rye, Sussex.’

Carolus made a note of it and then, since it was only just noon, decided to accept Trotter’s invitation to meet him at the White Horse.

How many times during his score of investigations, he reflected, had the local pub provided him with just that scrap of information, that piece of gossip, that trifling incident which had made his case? Publicans and barmaids, conversation-loving folk for the most part, threw out information often carelessly and nearly always unconsciously, and their customers talked unprompted of the things he wanted to know.

This morning, twelve hours after the village had been shaken by a startling murder carried out in front of a large number of them, the gathering at the White Horse should be worth watching and listening to. It was on such occasions as this that Carolus, who could adapt himself to most company, had an advantage over the police. The presence of one of them was enough to silence tongues however innocent.

Yet when he entered the bar of the White Horse he found only a few customers in desultory conversation with Harry Mason, the proprietor, who was, Carolus remembered, the father of Billy Mason, John Stainer’s nocturnal informant.

Harry Mason was a thin, alert-looking man with glasses, who seemed somewhat highly strung for his traditionally good-fellow profession.

‘Yes?’ he said to Carolus.

‘Has Billy Trotter been in?’

‘He’s in the snuggerly with George Garries. What can I get you?’

Carolus ordered a pint of bitter. He did not feel that, in spite of the

blood-curdling threat with which George had left him on his own ground, he would be hostile now. A murder made the whole world kin, and behind George's rather over-masculine manner Carolus sensed a rather weak and easily influenced character. His devotion to his father, whom Carolus had angered, was, after all, understandable. He took his pint and went through the door which Mason had indicated as that of the snugery.

The two young men were in armchairs. Billy Trotter said, 'You know George, don't you?' and Carolus smiled and said he did.

'He's our band leader,' Billy went on, 'as I dare say you saw last night.'

George, in order to say something and show there was no ill-feeling, added, 'I play the trumpet.'

'He's good,' said Billy. 'He ought to be a pro.'

This was getting nowhere.

'You must both have been quite near Horseman when he collapsed.'

'Just under the lectern,' agreed George.

'It didn't half give me a shock when he slumped over. I thought at first he'd just passed out.'

'You didn't hear the shot then?'

'No. That's the funny part,' said Billy. 'No one seems to have heard it. Of course, those fire-crackers were going off at the time.'

'Do you think that was a coincidence?'

'I simply don't know. I can't believe young Drummer Sloman can have shot Horseman.'

'He didn't. I was standing right beside him,' Carolus said.

'Then why have the cops taken him in?' George asked.

'Stands to reason,' said Billy. 'He'd got a gun. A shot had been fired from it. No one else was found with a gun. His young brother was raising hell with fireworks at the time. He's known to be a good shot. What else can they do? But we don't know what the experts will say about the angle of fire, type of bullet and that. They're pretty hot on all that sort of thing nowadays. I think they'll have to let Drummer go. You can't hold anyone more than a certain time on suspicion, you know, unless you've got some evidence to back it. What evidence is there against Drummer, when it comes to it?'

'See what you mean.'

'But if it wasn't Drummer,' went on Billy, 'who the hell was it? And how come no gun was found on anyone?'

'I think I might be able to account for that,' said Carolus quietly. Both

young men looked up at him intently. 'You see, while Rutters kept anyone from going out of the front of the hall, I went round to the back, where there's that sort of vestry or committee room.'

They nodded. As members of the band which often played in the hall they knew it well.

'I got there pretty sharply, but there was still time for someone to have come out of the hall to the door, thrown the gun out of sight, and got back before I reached it. No one could have got away entirely—I should have seen him as I came round. But he could have thrown away the gun, and then when everyone was let out come round and picked it up.'

Carolus, who had seen this chance at the time and searched the ground within easy throwing distance of the door, watched the effect of his theory. Billy was sceptical.

'But surely someone would have seen the bloody thing lying there? Or else seen whoever it was picking it up?'

George, however, liked the idea.

'I don't see why. There's no light round there except from the door. And who thought to notice what anyone did when we were all let out?'

'I just mentioned it as a possibility,' said Carolus modestly, and called for another round.

'I'm afraid I rather shouted you out the other day,' George said to Carolus when they had their pints. 'Only you'd upset the old man, and I don't like to see the old man upset. He's a bit touchy, I know, but there was no call to ask him a lot of questions like you did.'

'I know. It's a vice of mine.'

'Specially about the Beacon, and that. Dad hates the Beacon. He won't even go that way since that little boy was found there last year.'

'Oh, well,' said Carolus pacifically.

'Dad's trying to sell it. He doesn't want it on his land. He says the soil round there's good for nothing. Rocks and that. You can't even put sheep out there—they'd starve. Might keep a few goats, I suppose.'

'Goats,' said Carolus. 'Do you keep goats?'

George did not seem to like the question and evaded it.

'What's the good of them? Milk's only good for cheese and there's no time for that sort of thing on a farm today. I believe, years ago, there was quite a lot of goats on Guys. But not nowadays.'

'Strange animals,' said Carolus. 'They're said to be the devil's familiars.'

‘You don’t want to talk of the devil here, you know,’ said Billy with mock solemnity. ‘It doesn’t do. Guys people are supposed to be in league with him. You’d believe it if you could have seen Horseman’s place when I got there this morning. You’ve never seen such a mess in your life.’

It was Billy’s turn at last. He had waited a long time to take the floor with the story of the burglary at Horseman’s, on which he was an authority. George good-naturedly encouraged him.

‘Go on. Was it really? Who do you think had done it? Same person as fired the shot?’

‘Very likely. But I wouldn’t be sure. It was taking a risk after getting away with the other, wasn’t it?’

‘They should catch this one, anyway,’ George considered. ‘Fingerprints, and that. I suppose we shall all have to have them taken. Rutters will be running round like a dog with two tails.’

A noisy group, with two women among them, came in from the other bar and George and Billy rose to leave.

‘I suppose *you* didn’t do that job at Horseman’s?’ Billy asked George with a grin. ‘You could have got the stuff away in your old car easy.’

George took this in good part.

‘I should have made a real job of it if it had been me,’ he said. ‘Besides, I hadn’t got the car. The old man was in a flaming temper at being kept hanging about and cleared off in the car without waiting for me. I had to walk home.’

‘Poor old George! Well, I must run. The wife told me if I was late again this Sunday she’d give my dinner to the dog. So long, Mr Deene. Cheerio, George.’

Twelve

The official who would conduct the inquest on Connor Horseman was a friend of John Stainer and came to dinner one evening not long before the occasion. He was a solicitor named Barfinney, a precise and dry little man. Clearly he would say nothing about the matter; on the other hand, he seemed quite ready to hear it discussed by John and Carolus. Perhaps he hoped, without committing himself or his office as coroner, to learn a little that might enable him to ask searching questions when the time came—a perfectly legitimate objective. Carolus was thus enabled to set him on the track of information he himself hoped to gain.

Whether or not Mr Barfinney profited from the occasion, Carolus certainly learned several things from the inquest itself. In the first place, the ballistics expert was closely questioned.

Carolus by temperament was an investigator who depended more on psychology than forensic science, but in this case, in which the actual shooting of a man in public was so puzzling, carried out as it had been without the knowledge of most if not all of those present, he was anxious to learn everything he could from an expert.

The bullet, it appeared, had been fired from a .38 revolver from within the hall. There had been some wild theorising about telescopic sights and firing from some distance through the top parts of the long windows which were open. This now seemed out of the question, however good a target Horseman had been, illuminated at his lectern. It appeared rather that someone on the floor of the hall had killed Horseman, and according to minute calculations the shot had come from the front part of the hall. It was surmised that a silencer had been used and the fire-crackers were remembered, but even then the basic problem remained—how could anyone have aimed a revolver and fired it without attracting attention? From under a table? From behind cover of some kind? Concealed by an elaborate costume? It was a complete mystery.

Drummer Sloman was closely questioned. Enough evidence was produced to save him from being suspected of firing the shot himself, but as the coroner pointed out, there was only his own testimony to say that the pistol had been in his holster at the time. Having introduced it to the hall as an inconspicuous part of his cowboy's get-up, he could have passed it to an

accomplice and have received it back before he had appeared so confidently before the police. It was undeniable that a shot of the calibre which had killed Horseman had recently been fired from it.

There was breathless attention when Drummer was asked where he got the revolver. Before answering, he glanced at the police as though seeking guidance on whether or how he should answer, but their faces remained impassive.

‘A friend lent it to me,’ he said. ‘To go with the costume I was wearing. It was not loaded.’

‘What was this friend’s name?’

‘Grant.’

The coroner turned to the police.

‘Is Mr Grant to be called?’

The officer acting as spokesman for the police answered.

‘Unfortunately we have not yet been able to locate him,’ he said. ‘There is considerable doubt about this man. Nobody of that name has been traced.’

‘He existed all right,’ put in Drummer irrepressibly. ‘I saw him a number of times. Poley Grant, his name was, and he was on some newspaper, though he didn’t say which. He asked me what was the use of a cowboy’s outfit without a six-shooter and lent me this one. It was him suggested the cowboy act in the first place, come to that.’

The police spokesman gave evidence with more dignity.

‘There appears to have been an individual calling himself by that name in the village on a number of recent occasions. He has been seen with the Sloman brothers.’

‘It was him put young Charlie up to the fire-crackers,’ said Drummer.

‘It would seem to be desirable,’ said the coroner pompously, ‘that this person should be found as soon as possible.’

However much the statement tried the patience of the policeman, he said, ‘Yes, sir,’ as he sat down.

Mr Barfinney then asked a question which startled his audience and seemed to discomfort the police.

‘Has any *other* revolver been found?’

After only a shade of hesitation, the police spokesman said, ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Oh, it has? I should like to hear details of this.’

It seemed that the police gave these rather grudgingly. Was it, Carolus wondered, a pet clue to some theory of their own which they did not wish

to reveal at this moment?

A revolver, also an Army type, calibre .38, had been found in an overcoat pocket left in the cloakroom. When had it been found? After the public had left the hall—during the police search which followed. Had they identified the overcoat? Yes, it belonged to the late Connor Horseman. And the revolver? This also, according to his wife, had belonged to Mr Horseman.

Had the revolver been fired recently? No, but it appeared to have been cleaned. When? Impossible to say.

The coroner made a number of notes while this evidence was being given.

‘And was anything else found in the hall during the police search after Mr Horseman’s death?’

The police spokesman answered more readily.

‘Yes. Some chalk drawings.’

‘Chalk drawings?’ repeated the coroner, in his turn surprised.

‘Yes. A number of chalk drawings on and near the woodwork of the lectern from which Mr Horseman spoke.’

‘Drawings of what nature?’

Carolus, like everyone else, half expected to hear the word ‘obscene’, but the police spokesman was more knowledgeable.

‘In the nature of magic, what is called black magic, sir. Pentagrams and that.’

‘They have now been erased?’

‘They were thoroughly photographed before erasure. If you would care to see ...’

‘I certainly should.’

A number of photographs were passed up to the coroner, who examined them most carefully, one by one.

‘Thank you,’ he said at last. ‘Most illuminating, though I do not know whether we should assume that they have any bearing on the matter we are investigating. They may, of course, have been there for a considerable time.’

The police spokesman did not contradict this, but smiled a little as though he knew better.

After that there were no more surprises and the inquest dragged on to the inevitable verdict—‘Murder by some person or persons unknown.’

Carolus walked back to the rectory alone, looking not much concerned.

He had a theory of his own about the shooting, confirmed rather than denied by the revelations of the inquest. But the shooting was only a part of the problem, and he realised that to reach any solution he would have to go far deeper into the history of Clibburn, recent and not so recent. He explained this to John Stainer.

John had changed since the murder. Carolus felt there was a suggestion of resentment in his manner, as though he felt that Carolus's dislike of the dead man had prevented him from doing all he could to save his life. John would not, of course, have put it like that, but he had considered Horseman a friend and had consequently been blind to his faults. He was deeply distressed not only by the loss of the man, but by the scandal and publicity of a murder in his parish.

'I see your point,' he said to Carolus, 'but I cannot see what you expect to gain by more delving into the past. Connor had only lived here a year or so longer than I.'

'But most of the others have lived here all their lives.'

'If you really think that more knowledge of Clibburn in earlier days will help you,' said John not very amiably, 'I can arrange for you to meet old Canon Copely. He held my office here many years ago.'

'How many?'

'Twenty at least. He was here all through the Second World War. He's over eighty now, but he has an excellent memory. He has retired and lives with his daughter in a small house in Rochester. Would you like to go and see him?'

'Very much.'

'I will write to him. He does not like the telephone. So you may have to wait a day or two. But doubtless you have plenty to keep you busy here? You *are* going to find the answer to all this, aren't you, Carolus?'

'Yes. But you may not like it. I'm afraid there'll be a lot more dirty linen to be washed.'

John looked at him uncomfortably.

'Why? Surely it's a matter of finding a murderer and seeing him punished?'

'It's not as simple as that. There may be more people involved.'

John shook his head and fell silent. It was obvious that he was doubtful of the wisdom of inviting Carolus here in the first place.

'I'm sorry, John. I don't seem to have provided either prevention or cure. But I think you'll have a cleaner and more cheerful parish when it's over.'

Carolus found Canon Copely a saintly-looking old gentleman with a halo of fine silver hair. He had the amiable chattiness of the old and lonely, feeling himself full of reminiscences which there was no one to share. His daughter, a large downright woman, treated him as a small child.

‘Father Stainer says you have been staying with him for some time,’ he began, firmly using John’s High Church title, ‘so perhaps you already know that Clibburn is a very odd village—or was, when I was there.’

‘It’s odd in remaining rather isolated, I think,’ replied Carolus.

‘More than that—it has odd people. People who don’t fit into the life of today.’

Carolus was amused to hear this from a retired octogenarian, but nodded.

‘I went there in 1926,’ Canon Copely went on, ‘and stayed till 1949. A long time, it seemed then, but looking back, you know, these periods shrink. When I first took over—it was my first living—the church had been allowed to go down. The living had been held by a lazy old ... well, rascal I’m afraid he was; he got into trouble later ... and more people crowded into old Ezekiah Smith’s Bethel than came to church. Ezekiah was a character.’

‘His son Ebby still carries on the tradition.’

‘Does he? Ebby was a little boy when I arrived. Poor little fellow, he never grew to man’s height. But if you think he’s a fire-eater, you should have heard his father. Wrath-of-God Smith, they called him, and he used to preach hell and damnation in a voice fit to waken the dead. When I tried to talk of the love and kindness of God mine was a voice crying in the wilderness. At first, that was. They came round in time. Yes, they came round in time.’

Canon Copely’s voice faltered. He was lost in fond memories of his triumph.

‘John Stainer is up against a different enemy,’ Carolus observed, trying to steer him back to relevant matters.

‘Ah, yes. I know. We have talked of it. I’m afraid I blame Xavier Matchlow for that, or that infernal scoundrel Crowley. The wickedest man in the world, a Sunday paper called him once. Xavier fell under his influence when he was quite a young man and I’m afraid he never recovered from it.’

‘He was born in your faith,’ went on the Canon. ‘The Matchlows had always been RC’s. He lost both his parents when he was quite a young man and was left without guidance. He inherited when he was in his early

twenties and lived alone in the House, which didn't seem quite natural for a young fellow. At first we thought he might marry Alice Murrain, but when her father committed suicide, some four years after I came to the parish, she disappeared and we heard nothing of her for some years. It was during this time—in the 1930's—that Xavier was taken up by Aleister Crowley and the mischief began. Some terrible stories were told of him and all sorts of extraordinary people came to stay at the House—Crowley himself on several occasions, I believe, though I never saw him.

'What I resented most was Xavier's influence on Willie Garries. Willie had been brought up rather strictly by his parents, and as a youth was well thought of. He was a Scout leader and in the choir. But he stopped coming to church. His father died during the war, when he was about thirty, and, like Matchlow, he inherited. It was a fine farm and I dare say still is, though I'm told that the sort of mixed farming of those days is no longer profitable. Then there was the unfortunate affair of his marriage to a London girl.'

'Why unfortunate?'

'She never cared for Clibburn or the life of a farm. She was a good-looking girl, fond of the pleasures of those days, and she found it too quiet. Then during the last war we had the Canadians in Guys and Elsie Garries started to be seen about with them. It was quite a scandal and Willie Garries was a changed man, embittered and short-tempered. A son was born during the war, but after the German surrender Elsie ran away to Canada with an officer she had met two years earlier. Willie Garries was desperate. I even feared suicide, and if it hadn't been for little George I think he might have done that terrible thing. All this time he remained on friendly terms with Xavier Matchlow. I'm not boring you?'

'Far from it. Please go on.'

With a pleased smile the Canon continued.

'Then three years later, to everyone's amazement, Elsie returned. Nothing was known in the village of this before it happened, and it was all the more surprising because on the next Sunday they appeared in church together, with their little son. I was delighted, but unfortunately it did not last. After scarcely a year of reunion Elsie went as suddenly as she had come. The postman—you know what small villages are—denied that he had been delivering letters to her from Canada.

'Her disappearance was so sudden and mysterious that it caused a lot of talk and even, I believe, some official enquiries. But later Willie received a letter from Canada in which she said that she would never come back and that, so far as we heard, was the end of her. Soon afterwards I was offered

another living, in a large industrial town, and left Clibburn.

‘With regret?’

‘There were regrets, of course. I had known some happiness there. But I think I felt chiefly relief. There was always something eerie about Clibburn, like an evil presence in the place. I hope that doesn’t sound exaggerated. It is what I felt and your friend Father Stainer admits that he has similar feelings sometimes.’

‘Due to Matchlow?’

‘One hesitates to blame any individual and Xavier Matchlow had a charming manner when he pleased. But this indefinable thing did seem to centre round him. After Willie Garries’s wife left him Willie seemed to be more completely dependent on his friendship with Matchlow, and as little George grew up he was often with them. Garries never came to church again and when I attempted to see him he avoided me.

‘Matchlow scarcely ever left the village now. Crowley had died just after the war, I believe, and Matchlow had gone on seeing him to the last. But then he remained in the House, except for an occasional day’s shooting. He was quite a recluse, and Garries was the only person who saw much of him. He seemed to have some hold over Willie—all part of that devil’s work of Crowley’s perhaps.’

‘You haven’t told me about Alice Murrain.’

‘That was another rather mysterious thing. You know, I don’t like to speak in these terms, but Alice always was a very strange woman. There was something secretive in her manner and the village people really believed she had some extraordinary powers. Nonsense? So it may have been, but it was *there*. If one tried to tell them it was ridiculous, and ask how they could believe such rubbish, they grinned in a shame-faced way and agreed with one, but never changed their attitude to Alice. She went in for herbalism—quite a harmless interest, like vegetarianism, when it is considered without superstitious undertones. I dare say certain natural remedies are good, though doubtless the pharmacopoeia makes better use of them than the crude herbalists of the countryside. But when Alice prescribed something it was believed to have supernatural properties. I know this is a large question and half the cures made by medicine, either prescribed by the doctor or brewed by some herbalist in whose powers the sufferer believes, are psychological. Up to a point a lot of good may be done in this way. But people are credulous, and if they see that *good* may be wrought they believe that *evil* too can come from a knowledge of herbs and so on. Alice was thought to be able to cure skin diseases or headaches, so it was only a step

further to think that she could induce them, too. In other words, she was both respected and feared as so-called witches used to be.

'She was thought to be in love with Xavier Matchlow, and she must have lost prestige when she failed to attract him—even by her own love-potions, if she had any. As you know, she left the village. It was said that she put a curse on it. She returned just before the outbreak of the last war and she brought this man Murrain to whom she was married. She never told anyone where she had been or what she had done during the nine years of her absence. And although she did nothing and said nothing to make people think so, there were rumours that she was still devoted to Matchlow. There was something very queer and incongruous about this suggestion. Whatever may have been thought when they were both young, no one could imagine these two people in any way related now. Xavier was a highly cultured man who lived a civilised and, in some ways, elegant life, Alice was more than ever a countrywoman with no culture but that of rustic lore. Besides, Alice was married. The suggestion that there could be anything between them was, as someone said to me, grotesque. Yet the suggestion was made.'

'Yes. I see,' said Carolus. 'Tell me, did you know a man called Albert Gunning?'

'Albert? He was in my choir when I first came to Clibburn. A dear little boy. He was in the last war and did very well, I believe. He was the village blacksmith's son, and his father left a little money which he spent on building a petrol station and garage near where the old forge had stood, and Father Stainer tells me he has done very well. He was a talented chap.'

Carolus said nothing about Cyril, and when Miss Copely came in to tell her father he had talked enough he felt somewhat guilty.

'I'm afraid I've encouraged Canon Copely,' he said. 'I hope I have not tired him. It has been quite fascinating to me.'

'All about Clibburn, wasn't it?' said Miss Copely indifferently. 'I can scarcely remember the place. Have some tea?'

Carolus excused himself and thanked the old gentleman once again.

'I understand you're trying to clear up all their mysteries,' said Miss Copely. 'I hope you're successful.'

'I'm trying to find a murderer,' said Carolus shortly, and before she could recover from this took his leave.

Thirteen

‘Those coppers aren’t mad on you, Carolus. I can tell you that,’ said Drummer Sloman, stretched in an armchair in John Stainer’s study during his absence. ‘But one of them told me you’d offered to give evidence for me. Told them you were standing beside me when the shot was fired. They didn’t need it, as a matter of fact. The penny dropped that I couldn’t have pulled a gun and shot Horseman with people all round me. Still, it was good of you to say what you did.’

‘I didn’t say you weren’t responsible, in some way. I only said that you hadn’t fired the shot.’

‘That’s what they’re on to now. They seem to think I’d handed the gun to someone else, then taken it back afterwards. First of all, there’s no one I know of who’s a good enough shot with a revolver to have killed Horseman from the hall. Secondly, I *didn’t* lend it to anyone. Thirdly, it wasn’t loaded.’

‘But a shot had been fired from it recently.’

A gloomy silence fell on Drummer.

‘How do you think he was killed then?’ asked Carolus quietly.

‘I’d like to know as much as you would. I’m still under suspicion and it worries the old lady to death.’

‘I’m trying to find out, Drummer. Will you help me?’

‘How?’

‘By answering all the questions I ask you. Even if you think they have nothing to do with it, or involve your friends.’

‘I’ve told the police all I know.’

‘But you haven’t told me.’

‘There’s nothing else to tell, really.’

‘Let me be the judge of that. Will you?’

‘Okay. What d’you want to know?’

‘First of all, about this man Poley Grant.’

‘I thought that was coming. I can’t tell you where he is or anything about his private life because I just don’t know anything.’

‘When did you first meet him?’

‘Must have been about a month back. He fell into conversation with me

in the White Horse. He said he was on a paper and trying to get a story out of Clibburn because he'd heard it was a funny sort of place where people believed in witchcraft and whatnot. I said, why come to me? I don't believe in any of that. He said that was just how I could help him. Then he bought me a couple of drinks and asked me a lot of questions, and when he went off gave me a fiver.'

'Went off? What did he go in? Had he a car?'

'He used to come in a car, but I noticed it was a different car each time. I thought that was something to do with his newspaper and didn't take much notice, but it seems funny now.

'Then there was all that about scaring Horseman. He didn't say why, but he said he wanted the life scared out of him. I'd fallen out with Horseman—doesn't matter what over—and I said I didn't mind doing it, for a joke like. The police know all about this—so you needn't worry about telling them. Poley said when I had an opportunity one night to fire over his head, or behind his tail or somewhere, to scare him. So one night when I heard he was going alone to the rectory to discuss the dance with John ...'

'Father Stainer,' corrected Carolus.

'*Father* Stainer, I waited in the churchyard. Only young Charlie came along and spoilt the show. Charlie's a bit simple sometimes about anything like that, and he thought I was going to take a pot at old Horseman and jerked the gun up in the air. The shot hit Murrain's roof, so there you are.'

'Did you see Gerald Murrain that night?'

'I saw someone swinging a torch about in the road, but I didn't know it was Gerald. At any rate, Poley came over next night and said I'd scared Horseman quite enough and gave me a tanner. I'd got quite friendly with him by this time, and no one says no to fivers and tenners chucked about like that. He got on to young Charlie, too. We never saw any harm in him. At the time, that is.'

'And now?'

'Well, let me tell you the rest. I've told it to the police, and they don't seem to think much of Mr Poley Grant. Trouble is they can't find him. No one noticed him much around here—he wasn't the sort of type you'd notice. I tried to give them a description, but it sounded as though I was covering up for him. There was nothing you could get hold of. He wasn't tall or short or fat or thin; there was nothing you noticed about his face, and he dressed like a lot of people.

'Anyway, he was mad keen on the dance. That was when he was going to

get his big story. He suggested that cowboy outfit for me and told me to hire it from a firm he gave me the name of in London. It seemed quite a good idea—I enjoy anything like that. He was going to bring cameramen and television cameras and God knows what, and he got me quite interested. You know, television and that. And it was him bought young Charlie these fire-crackers and told him to let them off dead on twelve o'clock, when old Horseman was up at his lectern.'

Carolus, watching Drummer, saw no sign of hesitation or shiftiness or embarrassment. He might have been recalling the plot of a film he had seen.

'He turned up on the night. He asked if they hadn't sent me a gun to go with the costume, and when I told him not to be silly, people don't pass guns around like that, he said he'd lend me one. He didn't say where he'd got it from, but he had it in the car—the .38 revolver there's been all the fuss about. What the bastard didn't tell me was that a shot had been fired from it.

'You may think I was pretty silly, and it certainly looks like it now when we know what happened. But not at the time. I wasn't to know someone would get shot and I saw nothing wrong with this chap Grant. For all I know, there may not have been, only why has he sheered off? And why did he hand me a gun from which a bullet had been fired? And why can't they find him now? And why, come to that, did he ask me to meet him in the gallery of the hall at midnight?'

'That's the first I've heard of that.'

'I've only just remembered it. He said he had something for me and I took it to be another tenner. When the last waltz was on I was to go up to this gallery—it used to be an organ loft, I believe—and wait for him there.'

'Did you go?'

'Course I didn't. I'd seen him go off in his car, and anyway I was waltzing with a girl I knew. Good thing for me I didn't. I'd have had no witness to say I didn't pull the gun. Now you answer me those things I've asked about Poley Grant.'

'There must be possible explanations to each of them. We shall have to try to find them. The most important thing, Drummer, is for you to remember anything, any little thing, just a word he let slip perhaps, which might help us to find Grant himself.'

'Do you think I haven't been racking my poor bloody brains to do that? The police asked me just the same, but there isn't a thing. I don't think he came from London.'

Carolus seized on this.

‘Why not?’

‘Don’t know. Just didn’t get the impression he came down from London.’

‘But there must have been something to give you that impression. Try to think.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Was it the way he talked?’

‘No. He talked like anyone else. He did say one night, “I haven’t got far to go.” But that’s nothing to go on. He might have been lying, or London might not seem far to him. I think it was something more definite than that.’

‘Was the newspaper he talked about in London?’

‘That was it! He was always on about this big London newspaper and never mentioned the name of it. But he said once, “When I get up to the newspaper office tomorrow.” That’s what made me think he didn’t live there. “Get up to the newspaper office” sounds as though he had a journey to make, doesn’t it? That’s what gave me the impression.’

‘It’s not much to go on, but it’s something. But you never saw him with anyone from a newspaper—even on the night of the dance?’

‘No. His bringing the television and that was a load of baloney. I sometimes wonder if he was anything to do with a newspaper.’

‘Did he speak to anyone else here—other than you and Charlie?’

‘Not to say speak to. He’d order drinks from Harry Mason and perhaps say good evening here and there, but I never saw him in conversation. I *do* know he went up to the House, though. He never mentioned Matchlow, but I know he went to see him.’

‘And that’s all you can tell me?’

‘I’m afraid it is. I think the police believe I’m making it up about Poley Grant lending me the gun and telling me to scare Horseman. They think I did it on my own. If it wasn’t that they have witnesses to say I didn’t actually shoot Horseman I should be on a murder charge. But what I have told you is true, Carolus.’

Carolus decided to find the mysterious Poley Grant. His first step was to see the only person in the neighbourhood, other than the Slomans, believed to have spoken with him, and he went up to the House.

Xavier Matchlow received him with the same courtesy as he had shown before, and listened while Carolus explained his mission.

‘I ought perhaps to tell you that when I came here at John Stainer’s invitation it was because I have some experience in clearing up mysteries of

one kind or another.'

'Oh, I knew that. Poor old Stainer has thought for a long time that he is sitting on a sort of diabolic time bomb.'

'He seems to have had some justification. Horseman has been murdered. And the circumstances, if not diabolic, are at least unusual. You yourself saw him shot in front of a large number of people none of whom, apparently, saw or heard the revolver fired.'

'A bolt from the sky? Is that what they say?'

'A bullet from a .38 revolver. The point is that a young man of the village, your village, is suspected.'

'So I gather. But I'm no criminologist. I haven't the slightest idea whether the suspicion is justified.'

'Sloman says he was lent the revolver, from which a shot had recently been fired.'

'*The* shot, surely? There can't have been two.'

'It could be. Sloman says the pistol was lent him by a man named Poley Grant.'

Carolus watched Xavier Matchlow narrowly.

'Poley Grant? I seem to have heard the name.'

'He came to see you.'

'So he did. I remember him. A journalist fellow who asked a lot of impertinent questions. I sent him away.'

'How many times did he come to see you, Matchlow?' Carolus asked steadily.

Matchlow showed no discomfiture.

'You must ask Judith that. Or one of the servants. They may have turned him away half a dozen times for all I know. I only saw him once. He was trying to build up some story about black magic in Clibburn. I told him to ask Stainer about it and told him to leave.'

'You never saw him again?'

'No. I shouldn't have known him again. He wasn't a man to remember.'

'So, presumably, you wouldn't know if you'd ever seen him before he came here?'

Xavier looked up.

'Seen him before? I certainly wasn't conscious of having done so. Anything else? I admire your enthusiasm, Deene, and your curiosity, but I don't much like being the victim of them.'

‘One other thing. Had you any idea where this man came from? Did he say anything which might indicate that?’

‘No, no. He was just an impertinent fellow who called himself a journalist. Crowley used to have lots of them.’

‘Thanks. I’m sorry to have taken your time.’

‘That’s all right.’ Xavier became cordial again. ‘Wish I could have helped you.’

There was only one chance of finding Poley Grant and it was a thin one. Drummer had said that he came in a different car each time. This suggested that he had hired drive-it-yourself vehicles from firms not too far away. There were other possible explanations, but this one was perhaps worth trying. The number of these firms within a radius of, say, fifty miles was limited, and it would not be beyond Carolus’s power to try them all.

With Drummer’s help he concocted an approximate timetable of Grant’s visits. There had, it seemed, been four since he had met the Slomans, concluding with the night of the dance.

After two days of continuous motoring and fruitless enquiries he came to the large town of Girdlestone in Thanet, just over his limit of fifty miles from Clibburn. In the offices of the first car-hire firm he tried he encountered a character named Jerry Crafter who looked at him knowingly while he said his piece about dates of hiring. When he had finished Jerry Crafter said quietly, ‘Yes. I know who you mean.’

‘He hired these cars from you?’

There was a pause, then Jerry said, ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m not the law. I’m investigating something that happened about fifty miles from here.’

There was a grunt from Jerry, then silence.

‘It would help enormously...’

‘I dare say it would. *What* happened fifty miles from here?’

‘Murder,’ said Carolus.

Another grunt.

‘Why haven’t the law been to see me?’ Jerry asked.

‘I’ve no idea. Perhaps they don’t think this man’s movements are worth investigating. It has taken me two days to find the firm he hired from.’

‘I haven’t said he hired from us. I only said I know who you mean.’ After another pause Jerry said, ‘I don’t want the law round here.’

‘In that case,’ said Carolus, ‘I suggest you tell me what you know. I’m not

interested in your business or what connection you had with this man. All I want to do is to find him.'

'Ah,' Jerry was in deep thought. 'Well, I may be able to help you to do that. He gave his name as Arthur Rudd. He was staying at the Pemberton Hotel. I haven't seen him since the last date you mention. If you find him you don't need to say it was through me.'

'No. How many times did he hire cars?'

'Five. The four you mention and one about a week before the first of those.'

'Did he pay cash?'

'Yes. Always in pound notes.'

'What distances had he done?'

'About the same each time. Just over a hundred miles.'

'I'm afraid you may have to give this information sooner or later. I shan't reveal the source of it, but the police have a way of discovering things by what are called routine enquiries.'

'Don't I know it?' said Jerry bitterly. 'Soon as you said "murder" I knew what was to come. Did this chap do it?'

'I don't say that. I want to ask him a few questions.'

'Because if he did he won't be waiting round at the Pemberton Hotel for you to come there, will he? He'll have got his skids on.'

'I'm afraid so. No suggestion about where he might make for?'

'If I were in his place it would be London,' said Jerry.

'Why?'

'His sort can lie up comfy there.'

'His sort?'

'He'd been in trouble.'

Carolus was aware that this was a euphemism for gaol. 'How did you know?'

Jerry looked more knowing than ever.

'I can tell,' he said.

'Do you know his real name?'

'Yes. Walter Brandt. But I'm looking to you to keep me out of this. I know your kind. You won't drag me in unless you have to. But I want more than that. Don't *have* to. I've given you the information you wanted so it's up to you to do what I ask.'

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘And don’t get away with the idea that there’s anything screwy about this firm. It’s straight.’

‘And the capital to start it? But we won’t go into that. You’ve done me a favour.’

‘I don’t like murder,’ reflected Jerry, as Carolus prepared to leave.

He went, without much expectation, to the Pemberton Hotel. Yes, Mr Rudd had stayed there for several weeks. His entry in the book showed that he came from London—no specific address. Well, they didn’t like asking their guests for a lot of details. It wasn’t necessary in a quiet private hotel like this. Mr Rudd usually stayed in at night looking at television. But once or twice—well, yes, it might have been four or five times—he had gone off in the afternoon and not come back till very late at night. But he came in quietly—never disturbed anyone. He always paid his bill in pound notes. A very quiet gentleman.

Carolus returned to Clibburn.

Fourteen

Carolus received a message through Lucy Smith and Margaret Lark that Mrs Murrain wanted to see him and would be glad if he could call and have a drink with her at six o'clock that evening.

After what Canon Copely had told him about Alice Murrain in her younger days he felt less contemptuous of her pretensions. They still seemed to him absurd, but he realised that to some extent they might have been wished on her by the credulous and superstitious Guys people. What had started with a knowledge of elementary herbalism and an interest in folklore could have grown, in the early stages without her seeking, into a reputation as a 'wise woman', all too easily gained among backward people. Later she had doubtless exploited this and herself come to believe that she had some extraordinary powers. Perhaps she had, for fear in others often gave power.

Or perhaps Alice Murrain had passed over some borderline—of sanity or of knowledge of right and wrong. People could be in the service of the devil as others were in the service of God. Even during his first visit, when he had treated her with amused scepticism, he had been conscious of something very strange about her, something which had made him feel uncomfortable.

He had passed her house a number of times, before and since the murder, and he had come to feel that it was in some way different in aspect and purpose from other human habitations. The blinds in the upper rooms were always drawn close and at night their windows showed a dim half-light. This could be due to their doors being open on an ill-lit passage, but the whole house had an air of the unknowable. Impossible to guess, as with most houses, what was in its rooms. You looked at another exterior and assumed that this was a dining-room, that a drawing-room, the upper windows were those of bedrooms, but with Chimneys no such guesswork was possible. The only room he had seen had been furnished in Victorian times and this gave it a faded and stuffy look. Perhaps the rest of the house was similarly furnished? Or perhaps—it wouldn't have surprised Carolus—it wasn't furnished at all?

But whatever he felt about Alice, he had no doubts about her husband. Murrain was a lazy and shifty creature who had lived on his wife's money

for thirty years and played up to her pretensions for the sake of his own ease and comfort.

On his way round to the house, his mind still full of what he had learned about Poley Grant, or Arthur Rudd or Walter Brandt, he had an idea. It could conceivably be a good idea, it might be fruitful, and if it fell flat nothing was lost. He resolved to try it.

When Gerald Murrain opened the door he said, 'Hullo, Murrain. How's Walter Brandt?'

He had not dared to hope for the results this achieved. Murrain dropped the hand he held out to greet him. His face seemed to lengthen. He was visibly startled. When he was not in the fortifying presence of his wife he was a poor creature, Carolus thought, and seemed to grope for guidance.

'I haven't seen him lately,' he said.

'What do you call lately?' Carolus asked, but Alice Murrain's voice from the sitting-room put an end to his questioning.

'Come in, Mr Deene,' she called loudly. Clearly she had heard the exchange and was coming to Gerald's rescue. Carolus obeyed.

She was sitting, as before, in a high Victorian armchair and wore, if not the same old-fashioned clothes, at least ones extremely similar. A woman sitting in a chair like that, with a carved frame and half-padded arms, might be expected to be occupied with something, a book perhaps, some needlework, or a newspaper. There was no sign of these, and yet he felt uncomfortably that Alice *was* occupied in some way. Those dark eyes in her pasty face, like raisins in dough, were alert and watchful.

He greeted her and she asked him to sit down and offered him a whisky as though she knew his habits.

Carolus was aware of a curious smell in the room, which was airless and stuffy, though not very warm. It might have come from the old upholstered furniture, or over-heated and scented humanity of long ago. It was stale and pervasive, and Carolus found a word coming unsought to him—the smell of corruption. He threw the word out of his mind as ridiculous and wondered what on earth could have made him think of it, but it had made the smell itself more noticeable and unpleasant.

'How are your investigations proceeding?' asked Alice.

'As well as can be expected,' said Carolus, attempting to sound cheerful.

'You can drop them. I am going to tell you what you want to know.'

Carolus realised that, although the door of the room in which they sat was closed behind him, Gerald had not followed him in. He was alone with

Alice Murrain.

He kept up his bantering manner.

‘You are? That will be very helpful of you. You know who killed Connor Horseman?’

‘I do.’

‘And *how* he was killed? Because that’s really more puzzling.’

‘Yes.’

‘And finally *why*? You know the motive does count in these cases.’

‘Because he was an enemy to all the enlightened.’

‘Do you think so? I haven’t read his book, but I gather it’s a harmless scissors-and-paste affair, put together for some publisher who liked the subject.’

‘I do not speak of his book.’

‘I did not care much for Horseman,’ said Carolus. ‘He was too much of jolly good fellow, a funny man. But I can’t see how he can have been anyone’s enemy.’

‘You don’t know everything about him.’

‘Certainly not. I had only a brief impression.’

She was clearly irritated at his failure to jump at her bait and eagerly cry, ‘Who?’ when she stated that she knew the murderer’s identity. That he still failed to take her seriously.

This was not quite true. Carolus did take certain things about this woman seriously, and was anxious to hear what she had to tell him. He also took quite seriously the aura of malignance that was around her. She wished him ill, as they say, and he was aware of it.

‘The time for scepticism is past,’ said Alice Murrain. ‘What I am going to tell you I can prove. You have jibed at me, Carolus Deene, and at those who guide me, but you will be able to do so no longer.’

‘Now please, Mrs Murrain, talk sense. Those who guide you—this is some kind of perverted spiritualism, I suppose. Or do you claim Satanic inspiration?’

‘I make no claim that I cannot prove.’

‘To whose satisfaction?’

‘To yours. Even to yours, when you have heard me out.’

‘I’ll certainly do that.’

‘You want to know who killed Connor Horseman?’

‘Yes. But not who you think killed him. I want a clear and logical explanation of how he came to be shot by a .38 revolver in front of a hall full of people.’

‘You shall have it. I don’t make idle promises.’

Carolus said nothing. The smell had become overpowering and the heat of the fire seemed to have increased. He suddenly felt he wanted to get out of this room and into the fresh night air. Out of this abominable house and away from these evilly disposed people. But he was still, as always, inquisitive.

After a long silence Alice Murrain seemed to despair of a show of curiosity on his part.

‘I killed Connor Horseman,’ she said in a steady voice, all the more impressive for its naturalness.

Carolus brought this monstrous conversation down to earth.

‘If that is true, why are you admitting it to me? You must know the penalties for murder.’

‘Because no policeman could ever charge me, no judge could ever sentence me, and no prison could ever hold me.’

‘Very nice too. But you haven’t told me how you did it.’

Mad, he decided. Stark staring mad. But he still wanted to hear more.

‘Look in that cupboard,’ said Alice Murrain, and nodded towards an oak corner-cupboard set high on the walls, a piece of furniture older than the room.

Carolus did not wait to imagine what he would find, as he should have. He rose and went up to the cupboard. There was a rusty key in the lock—he turned it and opened the cupboard door, then remained quite still, examining what he saw. After his first emotions of surprise and disgust he felt disappointment. This is exactly what he should have foreseen. It was grotesque and rather horrible, but obvious and—he found the word with relief—corny. For in the cupboard was a two-foot-tall figure made of wax, not carelessly fashioned of candle-wax, but of such wax as might be used at Madame Tussaud’s to represent murderers and politicians. The face, with its piggy eyes and cheerful grin, was Horseman’s, but lest there should be any doubt one of the legs was made of wood. In the heart had been inserted, probably when it was heated, a long knitting-needle.

‘When did you do this?’ Carolus asked.

‘At exactly midnight on the night vulgarly called Allhallowe’en.’

She was mad. There was triumph in her voice. She believed, *really*

believed, that she had killed Connor Horseman. With the ancient paraphernalia of witchcraft, the nonsense of a superstitious European peasantry, she had gone through the rites and was as guilty of the intention of murder as if these had been effective.

‘And you really believe that this mumbo-jumbo was responsible for Horseman’s death?’

She was furious. She stood up as if to call down wrath on Carolus’s head.

‘How dare you doubt it?’ she cried. ‘But you don’t doubt it. You are only trying to hold on to your miserable scepticism like a drowning man. I told you I would prove what I say. If that is not proof to you, you are wilfully perverse. I tell you I thrust steel into his heart and he fell dead!’

‘What about the bullet?’ asked Carolus mildly. ‘They extracted a bullet, fired from a .38 revolver.’

‘The instrument is not important. A man may be killed through the scratch of a cat or the sting of a bee. It is the *will* that matters. The will to destroy him.’

‘I certainly believe you had that. I wonder why you have told me all this nonsense?’

Alice sat down again and eyed Carolus with hostile contempt.

‘To get rid of you,’ she said. ‘You have described what I have told you as nonsense. I regard as greater nonsense all this so-called investigation of yours which depends on trivial phenomena and ridiculous clues. With all your spying, can *you* say how Horseman was killed “in front of a hall full of people”, as you put it?’

‘Not yet. At least, not for certain. But I will.’

She stared at him fiercely.

‘I over-estimated you. I thought that when you saw incontrovertible proof you would cease your groping about for clues and learn that truth lies in greater things.’

‘Like wax figures.’

‘Silence! I could not believe that anyone could be so blind and so unbelieving as you, Carolus Deene.’

It was true. This woman had really supposed that he would be convinced, that no one could fail to be convinced *as she was herself*. That was the point. She believed that she had killed Horseman.

‘Well, there you are,’ said Carolus brightly. ‘I was never one to be impressed by the wax-and-needle routine. Would you mind if I helped

myself to another drink?’

‘Do. We have still some matters to discuss.’

‘Yes. To tell you the truth, I’m more interested to know that your husband has a friend named Walter Brandt.’

‘I know nothing of that. My husband has his own friends.’

As though he had been listening at the door for his name, Gerald Murrain shuffled into the room.

‘What makes you think I know someone called Brandt?’ he asked.

‘You said yourself that you hadn’t seen him lately.’

‘I was confused. You suddenly shot a question at me and I made the first answer that came into my head.’

‘Then you don’t know Walter Brandt. Perhaps you knew his father?’

Mistaking this piece of bluff and guesswork on the part of Carolus for a means of escape, Gerald said, ‘I may have. Years ago.’

‘Let me see if I can help you. Walter Brandt—the son, that is—has been in prison.’

No help came to Gerald from Alice. She might have been silently making incantations as she sat there looking somewhere above their heads.

‘No,’ said Gerald. ‘I know no one who has been in prison.’

‘He’s been around here lately, under the name of Poley Grant. I don’t know who invited him down—but I shall know. He’ll be picked up in London at any minute.’

Gerald pulled himself together.

‘Nothing to do with me,’ he said. ‘I know nothing about him.’

‘Very well,’ said Carolus, with a smile. ‘Let’s forget it—for the moment.’ Then he added, with deliberate impertinence, ‘Nice old house you’ve got here.’

Alice returned from the distance and spoke as though she had heard nothing of the two men’s earlier conversation.

‘It was my father’s,’ she said, ‘and his father’s before him.’

‘You were brought up here, Mrs Murrain?’

‘I was. I looked after my father.’

Was there something deliberately ambiguous in this statement?

‘Until his death. In 1930,’ Alice concluded. ‘It was a somewhat lonely life, but I made the best of it.’

What was the object of these confidences from a woman who had

recently been trying to convince Carolus that she was responsible for a murder? He waited.

‘I learned a great deal.’

‘One learns most alone,’ agreed Carolus. ‘All education is self-education,’ he added sententiously.

Suddenly Alice leaned forward.

‘Carolus Deene, I am not threatening you. I do not threaten, I act. But I am warning you once again and for the last time. Go away. Leave Clibburn and forget your foolish speculations here. Go while there is time. You are a vain and foolish man who deals in little half-truths and petty guesswork. There is nothing to satisfy your curiosity here. You will never learn any more than you know already, and you are in danger. Great danger. For a time you may whistle in the dark and think your foolish belief may save you, but it won’t. I tell you this, though I ought to leave you to your fate. If you remain here another three days there will be no escape for you.’

‘Why not twenty-four hours?’ asked Carolus insolently. ‘Does it take three days to work? I’ve told you I don’t go for wax and needles. But I do believe in coincidence such as the one on Allhallowe’en when you were busy with them, just at the moment when someone took a pot at the man you wanted to kill. There seems to me to be a lot more sanity in a belief in coincidence than a belief in what is called magic, black or white. And by the way, where did you have your session with the wax figure? I saw you at the dance, very becomingly dressed as one of the ladies of Portsmouth, New England.’

Alice became a twentieth-century woman, concerned with details, as she answered briefly, ‘I came home early. My husband left with me—it must have been soon after ten o’clock. Now if I can’t offer you another whisky...’

‘But you can,’ said Carolus. ‘It will have to be the last though, because I’m expected at the rectory. Good health to you, Mrs Murrain.’

He nearly added, ‘Happy hunting!’ but felt he had been guilty of enough bad taste for one night.

When he got home John Stainer told him that Mavis Horseman had phoned him.

‘Mavis Horseman? Oh, yes.’

‘She wants you to phone her in the morning. She says she has remembered something. How did you get on with the Murrains?’

How did he? It was difficult to say.

‘I expect to be turned into a cockroach at any moment.’

John did not think this funny.

‘Do you think she’s a really malicious woman?’

‘That is the most remarkable understatement I have heard in years. She *is* malice. If those powers of hers had any reality we should all be in hell. But cheer up, John. We don’t believe in witchcraft, do we?’

John did not seem so sure. But then Clibburn was obviously getting on his nerves.

Fifteen

The prospect of talking with Mavis Horseman after dramatic Alice Murrain was almost a relief to Carolus. That self-centred and conventional little woman who had shown such sang-froid about the death of her husband and the loss of his papers, and such concern about her mink coat, would be an antidote to Alice.

He telephoned her as she had asked and found that she was as chirpily commonplace on the telephone as she had been in person.

‘Oh, Mr Deene. How are you?’

That question, the conventional opening to so many meaningless conversations, repeated at intervals when the dialogue languished, was not one to be answered, for no one who asked it cared or noticed what the reply might be.

‘You wanted me to phone you?’

‘Yes. I don’t know if I’m doing right in troubling you, only you remember when you were asking me about Connor?’

‘I do indeed.’

‘There was this about my finding a note he had made, six, six six.’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘I was thinking yesterday when I was over at the bank in Chilbury. Chilbury was the nearest town to Clibburn, a dozen miles away on the Kentish mainland. ‘Everything’s been cleared up about the will and that, as I was the executor and sole beneficiary. The solicitors were very helpful and I was really quite surprised that Connor left as much as he did. But I shan’t come back to Clibburn. I have decided to buy a little place here, in Rye. There are such nice people and a cinema with very good films ...’

‘You were telling me about the number.’

‘Oh, yes. Well, that’s what I noticed when I went to the bank. It’s number sixty-six High Street, Chilbury. Funny, wasn’t it? I thought of you at once and when I got home I telephoned. I wanted a chat with Margaret Lark and I thought I’d mention it, anyway.’

Carolus did not wind up this talk in exasperation. On the contrary, as he had told Mrs Murrain, he knew the value of coincidence which so often turned out not to be coincidence at all.

‘That was your husband’s bank?’

‘Yes. Of course he had his account in London, but he used this locally. Funny, wasn’t it, it’s being sixty-six and his writing down three sixes that day?’

An idea had occurred to Carolus—one of his more farfetched ones, perhaps.

‘Mrs Horseman, could you possibly meet me in Chilbury?’

‘Meet you? Well, I really don’t know. Wouldn’t it look rather odd to people? I mean, we only just met over Connor’s death.’

This time Carolus did feel some exasperation, but he managed to suppress it.

‘It is really rather important. You may be able to help me clear up this whole wretched business.’

‘I don’t know *what* to say. Today, do you mean? I have got to go back to Chilbury for one or two things, but I meant to go next week. You say it’s urgent?’

‘It might be. If it turns out as I hope.’

‘I suppose I could run across.’

‘I should be most grateful if you could manage it.’

‘Well, I have to go to Weeks’s, and it’s best to get there early otherwise it gets so crowded. But I could meet you for a cup of coffee at the Gentle Ladies Café at about eleven, if that would do?’

A cup of coffee at eleven at the Gentle Ladies Café was a harrowing invitation for Carolus, but he was nothing if not conscientious, and agreed.

‘It’s a nice place for coffee,’ continued Mavis, ‘and they have ever such good cakes. Then we can talk over whatever it is you want to talk over. It’s a good thing I noticed that number up outside the bank, isn’t it?’

‘Very,’ said Carolus. ‘I’ll see you at eleven.’

He did.

She wore a tweed costume and a leather hat and looked absolutely *right* in the Gentle Ladies Café.

‘I don’t know if I did right in calling you,’ she said when they were seated on two imitation wheel-back chairs with hard seats. ‘But it seemed so funny it being sixty-six ...’

‘Mrs Horseman, did your husband ever mention a strongbox?’

‘No. I never heard him speak of such a thing. He may have had one, of course. He wasn’t one to discuss anything like that. Why? Do you ... oh, I

see what you mean! How clever of you! You mean that number he wrote down. Just in case he forgot it. Six was the number of the strong-box and sixty-six of the bank!

‘It is just a supposition of mine,’ said Carolus. ‘There may be nothing in it.’

‘Oh, I’m sure there is! It fits everything, doesn’t it? The comma after the first six and everything. And you think we may find what those people were looking for! It’s really quite exciting, isn’t it? It could be something terribly valuable. That’s why he rented a strong-box! I shan’t be surprised if it’s diamonds. I was reading about...’

‘Please don’t anticipate too much, Mrs Horseman. First of all, it may not be a strong-box at all. And then it could be something of no value except to one or two people.’

‘Well, there’s only one way of finding out,’ said Mavis decisively. ‘We must go and see.’ She turned to a passing waitress. ‘Could we have a bill, please?’

‘You pay at the desk,’ said the waitress, ripping off a chit.

‘It’s not far,’ said Mavis. ‘Just down the High Street. We could walk. I think it would be quicker. We’ll ask Mr Millston. He’s the manager and very nice.’

Mr Millston was too repentant to have time for much of his niceness.

‘How can I have forgotten it? Of course, Mr Horseman had a strong-box. I don’t know how it slipped my mind. He rented it about a year ago.’

‘Was it number six?’ asked Mavis breathlessly.

Mr Millston lifted a receiver on his desk and gave incomprehensible instructions. A secretary appeared with a ledger.

‘It was number ... let’s see, here it is,’ he said as he turned the pages. ‘Yes, number six. Do you wish to open it now?’

Mavis tried to control herself.

‘Yes, please,’ she managed to say.

They were taken to strong-box number six and a key was handed to Mavis as though she was receiving the freedom of the city. She inserted and turned it and pulled open the little iron door. But when she peered in she gave an ‘Oh!’ of disappointment. All that was there was the ring of a tape recording.

‘There,’ said Mavis as they left the bank. ‘I thought at least there would have been some charms which I could have worn on my bangle. Or perhaps

a bag of sovereigns that had been dug up somewhere. Why ever Connor wanted to hire a strongbox for a thing like that I can't imagine.'

Carolus, on the other hand, seemed quite elated with the discovery.

'Of course,' he said. 'I might have known. It all begins to fit beautifully.'

'Well, it may be very nice for you, Mr Deene, and help you to find out who killed Connor, but I don't mind telling you I'm most disappointed. It's not just the value, though it would have been nice to find a little extra like that, but when you realised what that number stood for I thought we should find something exciting.'

'We may have.'

'For you perhaps. Not for me. I never was interested in Connor's playing about with witchcraft and I told him so. It would have been better if he'd listened to me. No, I *don't* want to hear it played. If you want it you can have it, and I hope it doesn't bring you bad luck as it did Connor. I must get home.'

Carolus did not return to Clibburn till fairly late that evening. Margaret Lark hurried out to the entrance hall of the rectory.

'Congrats!' she said rather excitedly. 'Mave told me on the phone what you'd found. She's pretty disgusted, I gathered, but she says you're thrilled. It has solved the whole problem, she says.'

'It's quite untrue,' said Carolus. 'Have you told anyone this?'

'Oh, no. I don't repeat what I'm told. Only Luce Smith was here and I happened to mench about the tape recording.'

Carolus did not tell Mrs Lark that she could have put his life in danger, but he seriously wondered whether that somewhat melodramatic statement might not be true.

During the next few days he felt such enmity about him in Clibburn that he seriously thought of moving out of the rectory lest he should attract it to John. He already knew that the Murrains would do anything to remove him, temporarily or permanently, from the place, and though he still regarded Alice's powers as absurd, and did not take the wretched Gerald seriously, they increased the volume of hostility. On Xavier's attitude to him personally he had no evidence, and he did not approach the Garries or see either of them in the village, but ordinary people who had been civil enough till now seemed to regard him as an undesirable.

When he went to the White Horse the landlord, Harry Mason, who had never been effusive, now served him in silence and moved to the other end of the counter when he had done so. Even in the village shop he was not

given a smile or a good morning, and when Albert Gunning served him with petrol without a word he tackled him.

‘What’s the matter, Albert?’ he asked.

‘Nothing’s the matter. Why?’

‘You and Cicely were kind enough to help me when I first came here.’

‘I dare say. But there’s a limit to how much nosing into other people’s business we would stand for. I don’t believe you ever meant to find out about Cyril. What you’re doing is to upset the whole village.’

‘I’m sorry you think that.’

‘I do think that. And if I were you I’d get away quick, before anything happens to you.’

Carolus stared at him fixedly.

‘I wonder if you’ve got any reason of your own to say that.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Anything you don’t want me to find out about.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. *I’ve* got no reason.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Course I’m bloody sure. I don’t care whether you go or stay, but I know what the folks round here are saying. They don’t like things upset, I’ve told you that. They stick together, do Clibburn people.’

‘Even when it’s a matter of murder?’

‘Horseman wasn’t a Clibburn man. Not even a Guysman.’

‘So it doesn’t matter what happened to him?’

‘Not if he deserved it. And they wouldn’t care what happened to you, either. I tell you straight, you should get out of here.’

‘Not just yet. I’ve got a few things to do here first. Have you ever heard about the Bottomless Pit?’

Albert started, controlled himself, then said quietly, ‘Of course I have. What about it?’

‘Nothing. I just wondered if you knew about it.’

‘There’s nothing to know. Except that it’s bottomless.’

‘It isn’t. It may be pretty deep. No well is bottomless.’

‘You try getting the water out, that’s all,’ challenged Albert.

‘Thanks,’ said Carolus. ‘I will.’

He drove off. But after that interview he made a resolution. He could not with any conscience keep what he knew to himself any longer, whether he

was in personal danger or not, and instead of returning to the rectory and confiding in John Stainer he drove over to Chilbury with the recording in his pocket. He went to the police station and asked to see the CID officer in charge of investigations in Clibburn. He was kept waiting without explanation for over half an hour, but when he saw Detective Inspector Porritt he found the man not uncivil.

‘I gather you have some information for us, Mr Deene.’

‘Theory, rather than information. But with some more solid stuff.’

The inspector smiled.

‘I see. Now I won’t pretend that we welcome fellows like you poking round and forming your pet notions. But I happen to know Detective Inspector Moor, and he speaks quite highly of your work. He says you have been useful to him in a number of cases. You make wild guesses, but apparently they sometimes hit the mark. So let’s hear what you have to say.’

‘First of all, I suggest you find a man named Walter Brandt. It ought to be easy for you because he’s been inside. He’s somewhere in London, I think.’

The inspector, who had a rather stern but otherwise expressionless face, smiled again, this time with evident satisfaction.

‘Your suggestion comes a bit late. Brandt, alias Poley Grant, was picked up two days ago. He admitted getting hold of the Sloman brothers and persuading them to behave as they did.’

‘Oh. You knew.’ Carolus was not much surprised, but wanted to give the police all the credit for anticipating him. In accordance with his promise to Jerry, he did not mention Grant’s second alias. The police had evidently found Brandt by means other than the cars he hired. ‘Who was he working for?’ asked Carolus, trying to sound casual and hoping the inspector would not decide to be cagey at that moment.

‘Murrain. He very quickly told us that. Murrain knew Brandt’s father years ago. He got Brandt down here.’

‘Thanks, Inspector. You certainly know more about him than I do. It took me a long time to discover his identity.’

‘Did it, now? But you hadn’t got the fingerprints he left at Horseman’s house when he broke in and searched it, had you?’

‘I see! I am most impressed.’

‘Just routine work,’ said the inspector with his dry smile. ‘We haven’t been entirely idle. Much as it may surprise you, Mr Deene, I am not a congenital idiot and have discovered quite a lot about the murder of Connor

Horseman. But go ahead.'

Carolus went ahead. For nearly an hour he gave the policeman a clear account of his activities in Clibburn, including details of what was in the recording, his interviews with Matchlow, the Garries, the Larks, the Murrains, Drummer and Charlie Sloman, Mavis Horseman, the Gunnings, Judith Matchlow, Ebby Smith and Canon Copely.

The inspector listened patiently, his face remaining quite inscrutable.

'I see. You've been busy,' he said. 'A good deal of what you tell me is new to us, but I don't know how relevant it may be. What do you suggest now?'

'I want you to try something that will be rather expensive and difficult, and quite possibly will reveal nothing at all.'

'Sounds the sort of suggestion we so often get from amateurs. They think nothing of proposing a course of action which would entail the participation of the whole CID. But let's hear it.'

'There's a well about a mile from Clibburn known locally as the Bottomless Pit. I want it pumped dry.'

'Oh, you do. Just to follow a hunch of yours?'

'But a strong hunch.'

'I won't ask you what you expect to find. I can guess what you would say, and I know you want the satisfaction of saying I told you so. But I'm afraid it's impossible. It would mean a lot of work and expense which I could not justify. How would I look if we found nothing at all?'

'Silly,' admitted Carolus. 'But not so silly as if I undertake the work and expense and *do* find what I expect.'

'It would cost you a bomb.'

'Investigation is my only extravagance, and I'm one of those people, miscalled fortunate, who can't spend their incomes. No credit to me. I can't make more than a schoolmaster's salary. My father left me to face the world with a fortune and it's not as easy as you think. This is one of the few occasions on which I should consider it really useful. I should be delighted to meet the expense, but I felt I should come to you first.'

The inspector said nothing for a moment.

'Who owns this well?' he asked.

Carolus played a trump.

'It's on Church property,' he said. 'The only permission necessary is that of the Rector, with whom I am staying.'

Once again the inspector smiled.

‘What do you reckon the odds against it serving any purpose?’

‘I think it’s odds on. About two to one.’

‘We’ll do it,’ said Porritt at last. ‘But you must realise that you may make me a laughing-stock of the whole CID. I must be crazy—listening to all your circumstantial theorising, then backing your hunches. Now this well...’

‘It’s not bottomless,’ grinned Carolus.

‘No. But its probably bloody deep.’

‘When will you start?’

‘As soon as we can assemble the tackle. Since we’re going to do it there’s no point in delay.’

As Carolus left the police station he noticed a familiar figure coming out of the supermarket across the street. Mrs Lark was shopping.

Sixteen

Things had been difficult enough for Carolus before work started on the well called the Bottomless Pit; afterwards they became intolerable. Carolus, who was friendly and gregarious by nature, regretted this but understood the reason. Most of the villagers, who were not moved one way or the other by the death of Connor Horseman, resented this high-handed interference with local tradition. They might privately realise that no pit is bottomless, but they did not want the fact exposed to an unsentimental world. They felt as the inhabitants of Hindhead might feel if the exact depth of the Devil's Punchbowl was published in a Sunday newspaper. Or would have felt fifty years ago when there were inhabitants, in the true sense, of a Surrey village.

At the end of the first day's work a deputation, led by Ebby Smith, demanded to see John Stainer. They asked him to prevent further sacrilege at the well, and to do all he could to rid them of the presence of Carolus Deene.

This was not quite a ridiculous occasion, or one to be ignored, at least by John. He attempted to argue with Ebby and was met by floods of quasi-biblical rhetoric, and when he flatly refused both requests the men became offensive and threatening. They had never liked John, whom they regarded as an interloper guilty of papistical practices. They blamed him for bringing Carolus to Clibburn, and for allowing the work at the well, for which they held Carolus responsible. They left the rectory after voicing threats of what would happen to Carolus if he remained in the village.

Carolus, who was out at the time, immediately offered to leave.

'After all,' he said, 'there is no earthly reason why I should stay here and be an embarrassment to you. I have already put my case, which is well advanced, to the police, and I can quite well see it out from Chilbury, or anywhere else within easy distance.'

'There *is* a reason,' said John hotly. 'I have put up with quite enough from Ebby and his friends, and if you leave now it would look like a complete surrender on my part. If there is any danger...'

'There is, I suppose. Though not from that lot. But I take your point. You cannot be told who you are to have in your own house and you cannot be expected to interfere with the police.'

'There is some real necessity for emptying the well, I suppose? You've

told me so little of where your enquiries are leading.’

There was a touch of resentment in this.

‘I’m sorry, John. I couldn’t confide in you. But I promise you that when the work at the well is finished, whether or not it leads to what I hope, I will tell you everything from the beginning. You won’t like some of it, but you shall hear it all.’

‘I must be satisfied with that. But I think you ought to stay in tonight. I don’t want to be melodramatic, but I really don’t think you should make yourself a target.’

‘For gunfire? There *has* been rather a lot of shooting in this case, hasn’t there? But I’m going down to the White Horse—as a gesture if you like. I’m a firm believer in taking any old bull by the horns.’

When he entered the bar of the White Horse it was fairly crowded. Probably those who had accompanied Ebby Smith were there, Carolus thought, and perhaps some others. He noticed Billy Trotter and George Garries together, as they often were, and also saw Gerald Murrain sitting at the bar alone.

He ordered a whisky and soda and Harry Mason served it mechanically as though dumbfounded at his entry. But in a few minutes the bar was empty. Every man had walked out.

Mason was furious, and perhaps not only because of the loss of custom.

‘I’ll thank you to finish that up and leave,’ he said to Carolus.

‘That’s all right. I don’t want to deprive you of trade. I’ll go over to Chilbury for a drink.’

He left the bar, expecting to see some of its recent customers waiting outside. There was no one, but as he drove away a stone hit the boot of the car with some force.

‘Damn,’ he said, thinking of the paintwork. ‘What a childish thing to do.’

Returning an hour later, he found the village deserted, but it occurred to him that if there was any serious danger now was the time for it. The garage at the rectory was on the far side of the house and to reach the front door, of which he had the key, he had to walk along a gravel path in front of its windows. Old wartime instincts told him that he could be under fire from the garden wall and that there was a footpath on the other side of it.

He put the car away, locked the garage, and started to walk towards the door. Then he noticed that ahead of him a window on the ground floor, the Larks’ sitting-room, was brightly lit. He thought of Horseman’s account of noticing a light in a window of Chimneys just before the first shot.

It was a windy night and branches swayed around him. He had a distinct premonition of danger, attributing it to 'nerves' brought on by the events of the evening, and as he reached the lighted area he dropped.

Absurd way to behave, he thought, but almost instantly there was a shattering explosion and an echo of broken glass. A rifle shot, he noticed. It had come from the wall only fifty yards away.

Carolus lay still. He was covered by the remains of an herbaceous border, but it would not rise high enough to protect him if he stood up. Then he saw Mrs Lark foolishly peering out of the window.

'Get away from there,' he called. 'And put that light out.'

In a moment there was darkness on his left and he went on his way.

John was waiting for him in the hall. He didn't ask what had happened. It was evident.

'Shall I ring the police?' he suggested.

'Must, I suppose. It won't do any good. Whoever it was is half a mile away by now and the police, like everyone else, need their rest. But we should be to blame if we didn't inform them at once.'

It was past two o'clock in the morning when Carolus finally got to bed and he did not sleep easily.

He woke next day to the same sense of impending trouble or danger. There was nothing he could do till the operations at the well were completed, and he mooched about restlessly all the morning, avoiding conversation with either John or the Larks. But early in the afternoon there was a phone call which he answered.

He knew at once who it was though his caller gave no name, not from any motive of secretiveness, but because he was fairly drunk and like many people in that condition assumed that his identity would be apparent to all the world. It was William Garries.

'That Deene, you bastard? I want to speak to you.'

His voice was thick and angry. Carolus waited.

'Did you put the police on to emptying the Bo'mless Pit?'

'Yes.'

'Dirty low-down cunning bastard, you are. You're trying to do for me, aren't you? Well, you won't bloody well succeed. No one's going to shut me up. Understand? Think I'm going to spend the rest of my life in prison because *you* want it? Not bloody likely.'

'Listen, Garries...'

‘Don’t tell me to listen to you. You listen to me. You come out here and you’ll learn a bit more. Come on out, you snooping sneaking ...’ The rest of the epithet was lost. ‘I’ll show you something you can run to the police with. I’ll make you sorry you ever came to this place. I shall be in the Long Barn. So come on out and do a bit more investig’ating.’

The telephone was cut and when Carolus tried to ring back there was no answer.

After that he did not hesitate, but got out the car and drove to Garries. In the yard was a youth known as Ebby’s Eldest, a gangling, staring fellow who worked on the farm.

‘Where’s Mr Garries?’

Ebby’s Eldest answered slowly. ‘Don’t know. Haven’t seen him this afternoon. In the house I expect.’

‘Where’s George?’

‘Gone to the pictures over at Chilbury.’

‘To the pictures?’ It was incredible that without some motive of his own George was sitting in a cinema at this point.

‘That’s what he said,’ replied Ebby’s Eldest.

‘Which is the Long Barn?’

‘That one. Over there.’

Carolus walked across the yard and tried the heavy oak door. It opened quite easily. On the floor, a few feet in front of him, was the body of William Garries. The top of his head had been blown off and beside him lay a rifle.

In spite of his various sanguinary investigations Carolus had not seen anything so horrifying. He felt violently sick and giddy and made for the fresh air. The key of the barn door was in the lock and he turned it.

‘Don’t let anyone go in there,’ he said fiercely to Ebby’s Eldest, ‘and don’t try to get in yourself.’

The mouth dropped, but there was no reply.

‘How long had you been in the yard when I came?’

‘I’d only just come. Been down the meadow.’

‘Has anyone been round the farm this afternoon?’

‘Not that I know. Might have been—I was down the meadow. There’s no one else now.’

There was no one in the house, either, though the back door was open and Carolus could enter and look for the telephone. He found it and got through to Inspector Porritt. Quite calm now, he described what he had

found. Porritt did not seem surprised, but then, Carolus remembered, he never seemed surprised.

‘Where’s the son?’ he asked curtly.

‘In the cinema at Chilbury. Trying to establish an alibi, perhaps?’

‘All right. We’ll pick him up. I don’t know what we’re going to charge him with.’

Carolus spoke more urgently than he would have done to a CID inspector in other circumstances. This was no time for remembering that the officer knew and would carry out his duty while Carolus still ranked as an interfering amateur.

‘Anything! So long as you hold him and don’t let him get out to this farm. Charge him with possessing an Army rifle—he can’t have a licence for it. But for God’s sake don’t let him get to Garries, Inspector.’

Perhaps Porritt understood and forgave this outbreak.

‘I’ll do what I can,’ he said. ‘Where are you speaking from?’

‘From the farmhouse.’

‘Why don’t you stay there till we come? We shan’t be long.’

Why not? At first he had thought only of getting away from the place, but he realised that Ebby’s Eldest was unreliable and there might be other callers.

‘I will,’ he told Porritt, and hung up.

Ebby’s Eldest was still in the yard.

‘Did you hear a shot fired this afternoon?’ Carolus asked him.

‘No. Can’t say I did. Not this afternoon. Why?’

‘You’ll hear soon enough. You’d better wait here till the police come. They may want to ask you some questions.’

This took a few moments to digest.

‘What for?’ asked Ebby’s Eldest at last. ‘I haven’t done anything. What’s going on? What’s in the Long Barn?’

‘It’s all right, Smith. You keep calm, my lad. We’ll both hang on till the police get here.’

‘I’ve finished for the day. I want to get home. My tea-time.’

‘You shall. Just hang on a bit, there’s a good fellow.’

It was, in fact, nearly half an hour before the police arrived and Porritt was with them. Carolus gave him a look of enquiry and received a nod. So they had found George Garries. Carolus pulled out of his pocket and

handed the inspector the hefty iron key of the barn.

‘It’s all yours,’ he said. ‘I’m not going back in there.’

‘Turned you up, did it?’ said Porritt. ‘Come down to the station later. They’ll finish at the well this afternoon, and there may be some results.’ The last words were called over his shoulder as he walked across to the barn.

Having nothing else to do, and not wishing to meet John Stainer or Margaret Lark at the rectory, he drove on to Chilbury. After having a much-needed cup of tea at the Gentle Ladies he asked the way to the cinema. There was only one in Chilbury and he went to it. He greeted the young lady in the paybox and asked a question about times of the evening shows. He was delighted to find that with no more encouragement the young lady, a platinum blonde with black eyebrows, was eager to chatter. Perhaps there were few cinema-goers that day and she was lonely.

‘We’ve had quite a scene here this afternoon,’ she said. ‘The police were here, and everything.’

‘Oh. Someone misbehaving?’

‘Not here, he wasn’t. I don’t know what he had done, to tell you the truth, but they took him away. He wanted to see this picture *A Hatful of Dollars*, though no one else seems to.’

‘What time was that?’ Carolus asked idly.

‘Just before the programme started—at two-fifteen.’

‘And when was he arrested?’

‘Oh, not till getting on for five. It’s a double feature. What makes you so curious?’

‘I was wondering if the poor chap had been able to see his picture.’

Leaving the blonde, he strolled round the back of the cinema. This was not his kind of investigation, but he had time to kill and was as ever inquisitive. Yes, there was an exit leading to the car-park so that George Garries could have, if he wanted, left the cinema, gone out the back way to his car, and been absent for at least an hour and a half without attracting attention.

It was time now to go to the police station. He was met by one of the two younger CID men.

‘The detective inspector had to go out,’ he said. ‘He came back from Clibburn twenty minutes ago, but he’s just run out again.’

‘Damn. I particularly wanted to see him.’

The plain-clothes man seemed to be enjoying a private joke.

'I know you did. But he told me before he went that if you came I was to show you something in his office.'

'From the well?'

This was too direct a question for the CID man, who smiled again.

'He didn't say anything about that, but you can come and look at it.'

They went to the office upstairs in which Porritt had first interviewed Carolus. He looked about him, then saw lying on the table in front of Porritt's seat an object which he examined closely, without touching it.

'You may not believe it,' he said to the CID man, 'but this is exactly what I expected to find.'

'I *don't* believe it,' the man replied, though quite good-humouredly. 'You can pick it up, if you want. It's been under water for over a week.'

Carolus did so and studied it.

'It is, you know. Down to the last detail.'

'Well, I'll tell you what you didn't expect to find, though you can't see that and wouldn't want to, I reckon.'

'Human remains?' asked Carolus calmly.

'Oh, you've been told, have you? Remains is right. You've never seen...'

'Do you mind? I've just had my tea. Were they weighted?'

'Yes. With a chain.'

'Been there about twenty years?'

'They haven't been properly examined yet. But that's the first impression.'

'Of a woman?'

'You know a lot, don't you? Yes. A woman. So they say.'

'Thank you for showing me this and give my regards to the Inspector. I don't expect I shall see him again. I'm leaving here tomorrow.'

'All right. I will. He'll be sorry to have missed you.'

'If he should want to ask me anything, tell him to phone me at the rectory tonight.'

'I don't expect he will,' said the CID man, and Carolus went out.

Seventeen

When later that evening Carolus and John were deep in armchairs, the door closed against eavesdroppers, the fire flickering brightly, drink and smokes beside each of them, Carolus kept his promise and told his friend the whole ugly story.

‘It became fairly obvious in the course of this case that behind it there was what is called in the language of the cinema a master-mind. Clumsy work contrasted with intricate and adroit planning, amateurism with skilled artistry. It should have been equally obvious, even to the most casual observer,* that the owner of this mind was Xavier Matchlow. No one but he had the intelligence, the experience in diabolism, the means, the motive—as one saw in time—to direct the others involved. Who these were, and the parts they played and why they played them, were the basic problems.

‘It has seemed to be a case of black magic—it could far more fittingly be called a case of blackmail.

‘To understand the death of Cyril, and later of Horseman and finally of William Garries, it was necessary to go back into the past and here I came on the first anomaly. Elsie, the wife of William Garries and the mother of George, was a flighty woman who had gone off with a Canadian officer just after the war. Garries, according to Canon Copely, was desperate and near suicide. Yet when she returned three years later he forgave her, or at least restored her to her position as his wife. She was with him only a year and then, although we have no evidence that she had been hearing from Canada, she went again in such a way that it caused talk and even, Canon Copely thought, some official enquiries. These were set at rest, however, by a letter from Elsie in Canada, which Garries produced, saying that she would never come back to him.

‘As a normally sceptical man I did not believe that Elsie had gone off with a Canadian, stayed with him three years, returned to her husband for a year, and had then gone back to the Canadian. It simply did not ring true. I believed that in all probability she had been unfaithful with some other man, or had threatened to leave Garries for the second time with another man, and that Garries had murdered her and disposed of the body. This had caused some questioning at the time, but Garries fortunately had a letter sent to him by Elsie during her stay in Canada, saying she would never

return to him. Women of her kind rarely date their letters and the envelope could be destroyed. This satisfied whoever was making enquiries. The merest guesswork, you say. Well, yes, but there was more to follow. And although the truth of it has been confirmed only today it proved to be a useful hypothesis throughout the investigation.

‘Did it ever occur to you to wonder how Xavier Matchlow achieved his extraordinary ascendancy over the Garries? William and he were friends at the time of Elsie’s disappearance and William even then was drinking heavily. It doesn’t take much imagination to suppose that William, a lonely and emotional man and something of an alcoholic, confided in Xavier that he had killed his wife and dropped her weighted body in the disused well called the Bottomless Pit. Or that Xavier, when one comes to consider the character of the man, as we shall have to do, pointed out that no well is bottomless and blackmailed the wretched William ever after.

‘I found evidence that this blackmail was going on. The relationship between Matchlow and Garries was scarcely explicable otherwise. Garries was a short-tempered man, given to sudden quarrels, yet he never fell out with Matchlow, and became insanely angry when I suggested that he was under his influence. Moreover, I overheard a telephone conversation between the two which convinced me of it. I knew it was Garries who phoned because Matchlow said, “You had better remember that, next time you lose your temper,” and this was on the day after Garries had been in a rage with me and ordered me out of his house instead of following Matchlow’s policy with me, the *gent glace*. At the same time Matchlow said, “You’ll do exactly as I tell you. Both of you.” This told me not only that Garries was being blackmailed—for he would not have accepted this from any man otherwise—but that he had brought up his son to the same recognition of Xavier’s authority.

‘Yes. I admit there was an element of that kind of guesswork which Sherlock Holmes called deduction. But it will be finally confirmed as soon as the human remains found in the Bottomless Pit have been properly examined. A first examination has shown that they are those of a woman and they have been found weighted with a chain, and this may well be identified as having belonged to Garries, if further proof is thought necessary.

‘The undeniable fact is that when Garries knew that the well was to be pumped dry and its secrets revealed he shot himself, having sent his son out of the way for the afternoon. As he told me in a drunken telephone call before doing so, he was not going to spend the rest of his life in prison while

he had this way out.

'Xavier's blackmail was not for money, but for compliance in what was dearer to him, his occult practices. William was a superstitious Guysman, already half won to notions of black magic and the mystical significance of the Beacon. He became, and taught his growing son to become, a collaborator in these rites, as Alice Murrain already was, having been initiated by Matchlow himself, with whom she had always been half in love.

'If you have studied a life of Aleister Crowley, of whom, as you know, Matchlow was a disciple for many years, you will remember that the Black Mass played a large part in his preposterous make-believe and it seems possible that he actually had a sort of twisted faith in the efficacy of this Mass offered to Satan. Matchlow certainly had. I will not go into the disgusting and blasphemous nature of the thing, but tell you that some harmless animal—in Crowley's case a cat, in Matchlow's a goat—is slaughtered and offered to the Prince of Darkness amid paternosters said backwards, inverted crosses and other monstrous absurdities. It was for this rite that Matchlow led his little group of disciples, the two Murrains and the two Garries, to the Beacon each year on Allhallowe'en. On that ancient stone, probably once an altar, he carried out his ceremonies. The thought of it makes me quite sick, but there have been other cases of this which have come to light in quite recent times.'

'Time for a drink,' said John.

'Quite time, after what I have told you. Thanks.'

After a long pause Carolus continued.

'This went on for several years and restored to the Beacon some of its old reputation. *Papier-maché* masks of animal heads were obtained for the worshippers and perhaps someone daringly approached the Beacon closely enough to get a glimpse of the grotesque occasion. At any rate, it was spoken of in the district with bewilderment and awe.

'It might have continued uninterrupted but for two things. Its fame reached a man who was critically interested in black magic and had already written a book on that scourge of the witches, Mathew Hopkins. He resolved to look more closely and took a house in the village of Clibburn with the idea of joining in the ceremony at least enough to observe it. His wife, a commonplace woman, took no part in this.

'The other interruption came from a little boy who, with his playmate, ventured near the Beacon on the appointed night. His playmate, one of Ebby Smith's many children, lost his courage and turned back, but little Cyril Gunning went on. This happened on Allhallowe'en of last year.

‘Connor Horseman, cold-shouldered by the participants, as his wife told me, conceived a way of spying on them. He could not join them, he dared not follow them, but he would *hear* what went on. Before the ceremony he concealed a microphone and tape recorder at the Beacon. The beastly words, and Matchlow’s dramatics and rhetoric, at least would be on record.

‘But there was more on that recording than even he had hoped, for during the ceremony the peeping boy was observed and caught.

‘Xavier, as I decided when I met him, was a dangerous paranoiac. His hour as the priest officiating was infinitely precious to him—he saw himself as the devil’s representative on earth as he once had been taught to believe that the Pope was the mouthpiece of God. He was in a state of exaltation, possibly drug-induced. No earthly consequences of his action had any meaning for him, fortified by the anonymity which his mask gave him and by his lunatic belief in his calling. He ordered the boy to be placed on the stone, wholly or partially undressed and anointed with the blood of the sacrificed goat. Later, as Cyril told his father when he was found some distance away, he managed to escape, but exposure and fear had made him dangerously ill and before he could give any coherent account of what he had suffered he went into delirium and died of pneumonia.

‘Some time after the end of the ceremony that night Cyril’s father had found him and taken him home, but on his way to the Beacon Albert Gunning had met Horseman returning from it with a suitcase, which must have contained his recording apparatus. Gunning never forgot that encounter and was convinced that Horseman had been responsible for the death of his son. This had ugly consequences later, as I shall tell you.’

‘But didn’t Gunning tell the police he had met Horseman?’

‘Yes, and they questioned Horseman. He gave an explanation which entirely satisfied them, perhaps because, as Albert told me, they didn’t *want* to think anything had happened at the Beacon that night. Perhaps they too were Guysmen. There was certainly no very senior officer investigating the matter because Cyril’s death was a clear case of pneumonia, with only a few words spoken in delirium to suggest it was any more.

‘Horseman told them he had heard stories about the Beacon on Allhallowe’en and had gone up there to take flashlight photographs if anything happened. But it didn’t. He had been there since eleven o’clock and seen nothing, he said. He wasn’t going to tell the police of his recording and lose all the power it gave him.’

‘How do you know that about the police?’

‘Well, I have nothing but a nod from Inspector Porritt to prove it, but it

was a very meaning nod. When I was giving him my account of the case I suggested this was the substance of the notes made by the police at the time. Porritt has studied these notes and signified his agreement.

‘Let’s return to Horseman and his recording. It was unexpectedly interesting because it not only recorded the whole revolting ceremony and Xavier’s voice repeating the abracadabra he had learned from Crowley, but also Xavier giving those orders about the boy, and these might be said to have caused Cyril’s death.

‘But Horseman overplayed his hand. Now he would see whether these people would exclude him from their rites, whether they would dare to cold-shoulder him again. He was rash enough to call on Xavier to inform him of what he possessed and insist on being taken into his confidence.

‘Xavier Matchlow, having blackmailed William Garries for twenty years, was in no mind himself to be blackmailed. There was, as we know, a flaming row between the two men, after which Horseman hired a strong-box in which to keep the recording. I was fortunate enough to discover the whereabouts of this with the help of Mavis Horseman, and I have had the loathsome experience of listening to the whole thing. I am not surprised that the five participants in the Black Mass were all determined to obtain possession of it at any cost.

‘This was all in the past, John, when I came to stay with you...’

‘Have a break, Carolus. I wouldn’t miss a word of this, but you’re going too fast and too far. Did you tell the police all this?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’ve talked for an hour, and I still don’t know who murdered Connor. Or how.’

‘Nor did I, for certain, when I went to the police.’

‘But you do now?’

‘Yes, John. I do now.’

They were silent, but Carolus, after helping himself to another drink, continued.

‘This is how matters stood when you asked me to come. You had certain forebodings about the coming of Allhallowe’en and I didn’t blame you when I began to find out how things were.

‘I don’t suppose there was any conference between Xavier Matchlow and his four confederates. On the contrary, it was Xavier’s principle not to let his left hand know what his right hand was doing, not to tell the Murrains of his instructions to the Garries and *vice versa*. But he used them all in a very

elaborate plan to get rid of Horseman and the telltale recording.

‘First he wanted a go-between, someone to obtain certain results by bribery from Drummer Sloman. He knew Drummer perfectly well—the young man was partially employed as his gamekeeper—but he did not think of intervening himself. He knew that Gerald Murrain kept his acquaintance with certain criminal associates of his past, and he instructed him to find among them a youngish man of some presence and intelligence whom he would employ. Brandt, the son of a man who had long ago worked with Gerald Murrain, was to come to the district and under an alias, that of Poley Grant, a press and television man, make friends with the Slomans. All this ran very smoothly. Brandt agreed to do what was wanted for a large fee and went to stay at the Pemberton Hotel, Girdlestone, under the name of Arthur Rudd. Using a hired car, he came over to Clibburn on several evenings and, helped by his patron’s generosity, got into the confidence of Drummer and his brother.

‘Brandt persuaded Drummer to scare the wits out of Horseman by a shot from a sporting gun fired in the dark, which would narrowly miss him.

‘This was to be Horseman’s last warning. Earlier, as you know, Garries had hung upside down a crucifix which Horseman had given to the church as a sign that his, Horseman’s, days were numbered. This piece of occultism had not worked because Horseman gave it no more significance than a childish anonymous letter, and knowing who was ultimately responsible refused to be intimidated. But a warning shot was another matter. It would tell Horseman plainly that if he did not hand over the recording and leave the area he might expect the worst. Charlie’s intervention spoiled the effect of the shot, but in any case Horseman was an obstinate and a distrustful man. As you yourself heard he refused to tell us why he was being threatened. When he realised that the shot had peppered the tiles of Murrain’s house he regarded it as another empty threat. He under-rated the people he was up against.

‘The plan was now to shoot Horseman as he made his midnight announcement on Allhallowe’en. Drummer was to be the stool-pigeon. He accepted the cost of his cowboy costume because he believed it would help Poley Grant’s story, and accepted the loan of a six-shooter to stick in its holster, partly with the same object and partly because he liked firearms and fancied himself as a cowboy. But he did not know a shot had been fired from it shortly before it was handed over. He was to meet Poley Grant in the gallery of the hall sharp at midnight to receive a present for his help. If he had done so he would certainly have been accused of murder. It is doubtful

whether the evidence of the ballistics expert would have saved him. Fortunately he had seen Grant's departure and stayed in the body of the hall till after the shot, and there were plenty of witnesses to prove that he hadn't fired it. This was almost the only flaw in the scheme to frame Drummer.'

'What a filthy business!' said John. 'But you say the police found Brandt or Grant or whatever he called himself?'

'Yes. For another reason. Part of his job was to go through Horseman's possessions and find the recording. I do not know what would have happened to Mavis Horseman if she had stayed in the house that night, but as you remember Margaret Lark brought her back to the rectory. Grant did what he was paid for, and, though he failed to find the recording, he took away all Horseman's papers, including the book on which he was working, in his car. It was for this burglary that the police arrested Brandt. He had left some fingerprints, and in any case it was the sort of job the police are most expert at.

'Brandt was useful in another way. Staying at Girdlestone, he was not far from Margate and could run over there on the morning of Allhallowe'en and send a telegram to me which was calculated to keep me away from the dance. This was so clumsy that I attribute the idea not to Matchlow, but to Murrain. He knew, via Lucy Smith and Margaret Lark, about the Sticks and gave Brandt the words of the telegram to send. Fortunately I found the Sticks soon enough to return here in time for the dance.

'Margaret Lark and Lucy Smith, by the way, were not activated by malice, but were natural gossipers, and when skilfully questioned by those interested gave all the information wanted from them.

'We can pass over Alice Murrain with her wax and needles. The will to kill was certainly there, but unless you wish to believe in her claim to supernatural powers she had not the means.'

'But who *did* kill Connor Horseman?' said John impatiently. 'And how?'

'George Garries, of course. By shooting him through the heart.'

'But...'

'When I was leaving the hall after the murder I noticed a rather peculiar thing. It did not register fully at the time, but when I came to think about it I began to ask why. The band was in a hurry to leave and I noted that George Garries, the trumpeter and leader, had not waited to put his instrument into its case, but carried both. Why? Although he was in a hurry now, he had had plenty of time while others were leaving the hall. Why should a man carry a trumpet *and* a case when he could put one into the

other? Answer, because the case was already full.

‘What I hoped the police would find in the Bottomless Pit was the contents of the case. George Garries had told Billy Trotter and me that his father had taken the car and he had had to walk home—past that disused well. What more convenient way of disposing of it? I took a chance on this and I was right. At the bottom of the well was found a trumpet, and cunningly inserted in its metal was a .38 revolver. When the band stood up at midnight to play the national anthem it was this trumpet which George had pointed at Horseman, and on the first note the stop he pressed with his finger connected with the trigger.’

John Stainer thought about this for a long time, then said, ‘I’m not doubting you, Carolus. But there are one or two questions I would like to ask. When I left for home, a little before midnight, the band sat facing the audience. Horseman’s lectern was to their right, and if I remember correctly slightly to their rear. How could George have shot Horseman from there?’

‘It was *God Save the Queen* they were about to play, so that they were all on their feet. And because of Horseman’s ridiculous trick of tapping with a baton they had turned towards him. It was on the first note of the national anthem, that is on the word God, that George pulled the trigger.’

‘But how could he have achieved such perfect aim with the instrument you describe?’

‘You’ve forgotten the chalk drawings. Pentagrams and that. What appeared to be part of the black magic in the case was an exact indication of the aim he should take. Horseman would be standing to attention, square at his lectern. The drawings enabled George to point his instrument precisely. And the other questions?’

‘How did he get hold of the thing? It would need an expert to make it.’

‘There was one—at hand. Albert Gunning may not have realised the lethal purpose of it. He probably believed George, and George probably said that it was to fire a blank cartridge to ruin Horseman’s speech. I was told more than once what a brilliantly clever metalworker Albert was and he certainly gave proof of it. Besides, he had a violent prejudice against Horseman. He believed he was in some way responsible for Cyril’s death.’

‘Why were you so anxious for the police to arrest George at the cinema?’

‘I did not want another shot fired at me, for one thing. I don’t think George would have missed again. I was pretty sure it was he who had fired the night before because it was a rifle—the one which William later used to commit suicide probably. The Canadians were careless with arms, but I

didn't think there could be more than one rifle in the district. But there was another reason. George was one of those men who, while appearing solid and manly, have highly emotional characters. The sight, the really appalling sight, of the father to whom he was devoted, for whose sake he had committed his crime, might easily have driven him to the same recourse. I think that a murderer should be brought to trial.'

'You know, Carolus, you give the impression that you think Connor Horseman was in some way to blame for his own death.'

'I do.'

'For not telling you that first night what he feared?'

'No. For not going to the police at once when he heard the recording. He knew that Cyril Gunning had died from the effects of that night and he had no right to suppress evidence for his own ends. It would have put a stop to all that horrible business for good and sent Xavier Matchlow to a well-deserved prison sentence for manslaughter.'

'Yes. I see that. It would have made a frightful scandal here, but...'

'Scandals are not always frightful. Sometimes they clear the air.'

'Yes. Quite a scandal must have been created in Jerusalem two thousand years ago.'

Carolus nodded and a few moments later went up to bed. Next day he thanked John and Mrs Lark for their hospitality and left for home. He never returned to Clibburn.

***Or reader! L.B.**